



Hitchhiking the old Ruta 40 in Patagonia, Argentina

### About The Modern Nomad

One day in September of 2009, Patrick Falterman felt that he had had enough.

He was working two jobs and going to school full-time, running around like a mad chicken with its head cut off. Between study, school, work, and all the other obligations that came along with these activities, he barely had a moment to sleep, let alone was able to enjoy his life. He would joke with his friends that he was sometimes incapable of having a single conscious thought throughout the course of his day.

One blustery late September morning he woke up with a splitting headache. He sat up groggily; all he could see around him were the dingy yellow walls of his \$800 a month apartment on the north side of Houston, and his old unsheeted mattress, surrounded by subway sandwich wrappers. He looked around him, gave a cough, and took a deep breath of the putrid air that permeated his life.

A sigh. All he had to look forward to that day was a morning of mind-numbing classes, followed by a double shift at the County Line BBQ, where he would work until eleven, return home exhausted, go immediately to sleep, and wake the next morning to do it all over again. His every month was a long cycle of study and hard work, only to barely make his rent at the end of the month. He dreaded summer; then he'd have to work all day long. That morning, as he stretched and gloomily contemplated another agonizing day ahead of him, he finally realized with a lurch what was going on.

It had happened. What he had always feared, and what he vowed would *never* come to pass. But somehow, it had.

Patrick found himself fallen; fallen victim to being a machine for society, a slave to the endless, vicious cycle of the need to work all day just to pay rent and eat. He had become *one of those guys*.

As Bill Murray once said?

“And then, depression set in.”

And boy, did it really anchor itself down. All he could think was, “How did it come to this?” A busy, promising childhood had sputtered out to become this worthless mess of an existence. He felt awful. Depressed. A waste of

space, of human life. He skipped classes that day, and only barely managed to drag himself to work that afternoon.

He didn't know much, and still doesn't claim to; the only thing he knew for sure was that he wanted out. Anything was better than this. The ends to the life he was then living came out to be disappointing. Which was a euphemism for soul-crushing. He needed to get out or he was going to end up blowing his brains out all over his coral reef shower curtain.

But how?

The initial plan was a total, utter detachment from society and human contact. Patrick decided to go to the most remote place he could think of and simply live off the land, indefinitely. Get away, for good, from the crushing woes of modern society. Eat bugs. Poop in a hole every morning. Hunt, gather, survive. That was the life.

So, where was the most remote and wild place he could think of?

Well, the Amazon, obviously.

The next day, Patrick quit his job at the County Line BBQ and headed off to the local branch of Academy Sports and Outdoors in Champions, Texas. After a few hours inside, he emerged \$1,200 in debt. *Not to worry*, he thought. *Chase Bank won't figure that out until later, and I'll be long gone in the Amazon by then.* He called a friend of his to pick him up from the Academy, since he had bought too many things to carry back home on foot.

To get to the Amazon, he decided to simply purchase a plane ticket to Manaus, Brazil. His card was already overdrawn by \$1,200, but what could another \$2,000 hurt? Unfortunately, it seemed Chase Bank had caught on to his financial shenanigans by then, and froze his account.

Well, now what? He still needed to leave, and he sure as hell didn't ruin his credit on \$1,200 of equipment just to pussy out on everything. He needed a way out. Any way. Any how.

In October, the idea hit him like a fast train with no brakes; hitchhiking (he may have seen a movie about it.) So he sold his guitars, amp, and everything else he possibly could to get a little cash for the road. His \$1,200 guitar, sold for \$220. His \$700 amp, \$80. Apart from those he had nothing of particular value, so after a few days of pulling himself together mentally, he hit the long road west with \$300 hidden in his right boot. Yep, this was it; he was going to jet and never come back. Maybe he would die. Maybe he would be butt-raped by gangs of Mexicans with Virgin Mary tattoos. But he honestly didn't give a shit anymore.

And so on that morning, October 2nd, he was simply gone. No-one knew where he was for a few weeks, including himself. As he trode along down the concrete driveway leading out of his apartment complex, his \$800 apartment on the north side of Houston faded slowly into the early morning mist, its features becoming less and less defined as his footsteps took him closer to FM 1960. *Good fucking riddance*, he thought.

Well, this was it. No turning back for this bipolar mess of a young man. Hopefully something better lay in the path ahead of him; yes, something better was definitely coming. In fact, he could almost see the glimmer of opportunity, shining up there ahead of him on the almost deserted highway west.

He didn't really know where he was going, or what he would do when he got there. All he knew was the he was heading west. He hoped the answer of what to do would present itself sooner or later.

Eventually Patrick arrived to Arizona, still not having figured out why he came there. He camped for a few weeks in the Kachina Peaks Wilderness near Flagstaff, lived with a crazy old lady in a motel room for a month, and soon

found himself down to his last three dollars.

Ah, what to do? Find a job? Go back to the way life was before? How can one live in the civilised world with no money? The idea to simply survive in the wilderness had died in Kachina Peaks; it was a feasible life, but a hard one. Maybe sometime in the future, but certainly not then.

Perhaps this whole thing was just a big mistake; who was he kidding? He couldn't live like this. No-one could. He was cold. He missed his family, and his dog Hank.

That morning he decided to take a job at a local shoe store so he could get back on his feet. While he was drinking his coffee and reading the morning newspaper in preparation to go in for his first day, he saw an interesting ad in the classified section:

**Do you like to travel?** it screamed.

Yes. Patrick liked to travel.

**Do you hate being stuck in one place every day?**

Patrick definitely hated being stuck in one place every day. With a passion.

**Do you need a job?**

Patrick needed an interesting job.

**Then call this number!**

Patrick called the number.

After ten minutes on the phone, his plans had changed. There was a free bus ticket waiting for him at the Flagstaff station, and it was going to take him to Bakersfield, California, to become a travelling door-to-door magazine salesman. *This is going to be great!* he thought. Erroneously.

After less than a month with the door-to-door scammers, Patrick escaped yet again, this time into the concrete jungle of Los Angeles, California. The City of Angels. It was morning when he got there, and he stood on a bridge over the Los Angeles River, wondering what to do next.

Here was the situation: Nineteen years old, thousands of miles away from home. No clean clothes. Twenty-two dollars, still hidden in his right boot. No-one knew where he was. His pack was heavy. His legs hurt from walking all day, and his back muscles were cramping up. He was hungry, tired, and alone, and that bridge smelled like piss and suicide. He sat there and stared down at the filthy river, wondering where his life was headed.

Was he doomed to die here in Los Angeles, knifed in the ribs for twenty-two dollars and backpack full of dirty clothes and mosquito netting? Would he be homeless forever? Would he end up one of those people, sleeping on the sidewalk, stumbling around LA and whimpering for change?

No. No, he decided, he would not become like one of those guys. If he wanted to survive, he needed to stay on the move. At that moment, he knew that he would have to leave LA. *Tonight.*

That evening, Patrick boarded a bus to San Diego, too frightened to hitchhike out of LA. When he got there, he found that it was marginally nicer, and felt a little better after arriving to the bus station and seeing people actually

smile at him. It was dark by the time he got there; this was to be his first night sleeping on the streets of a big city. He was nervous. Terrified, actually. He decided to walk to the beach, since water always made him feel better. He found himself a nice dock, rolled out his sleeping bag underneath it, and fell asleep amidst the mild, southern California breeze.

The next day, Patrick spent the last of his money on breakfast. He was then totally broke. What he was going to do for money, he didn't know. Perhaps he would have to beg. It was then that he remembered that he had another way to make money, right there in his pocket?

The crazy old lady from the motel in Flagstaff had given him an old blues harmonica before he left for Bakersfield. He didn't really play it very well, and had just learned the basics the month before. But he had to get money somehow, so he popped a squat on the sidewalk in front of an old decommissioned aircraft carrier docked in the bay, set out an old coffee tin in front of him, and began tooting away.

For awhile, he didn't get anything. Then an old man tossed in a quarter. Patrick stopped playing for a moment, reached into the can, and picked it up out of the tin. He held it up close to his face and examined it; it was one of those old quarters, with the eagle on the back. The bright California sunshine glinted merrily off the worn-down relief of George Washington's head. Slowly, a smile began to spread across the harmonica player's face, and he tossed the coin back into the tin. It landed with a hollow-sounding *tink*. He started playing again, only this time he was really into it, rocking around, putting real soul into the whole thing. After that, people began tossing change in every few minutes.

About an hour later, he had around \$8. Not bad for a first timer, thought Patrick, and his spirits began to lift.

Patrick was homeless in San Diego for two weeks. In his time there, he learned a few skills that would be essential to his survival later on in his trip. Where to sleep. How to make the most money with his harmonica. He tooted away every morning and afternoon, making enough to eat and then some. Still, he was beginning to get tired of San Diego, so he decided to hit the road south to the tiny beach town of Imperial Beach, the most southwesterly city in the United States.

Imperial Beach was good to him as well. He would play his harmonica on the pier, eat subway sandwiches, and sleep on the beach in his tent. In Imperial Beach, he took the first of his many swims in the Pacific Ocean, even though it was winter and the water was cold.

After a week in Imperial Beach, Patrick's proximity to México became apparent to him. Since he didn't have anything better to do, he stuck his thumb out and soon found himself at the Mexican border. He went across a little pedestrian turnstile, and then realized with a lurch that he was no longer in the United States. He was in México, the fabled land of desert, and Spanish.

Tijuana was strange, new, foreign, and terrifying. Patrick loved it. After walking around for a few hours, he sat down under a worn-out old concrete bridge for a rest. He stared off into space. Whatever he had gotten himself into, it didn't matter anymore. He had made the commitment. He was in Mexico, away from his own familiar land, his familiar language. He didn't speak a word of Spanish; but by God, he was going to learn!

He looked around the walls of the bridge; Spanish names and gang signs were scrawled on the dingy concrete in red spray-paint. One of the taggers had left a can a few feet away from where Patrick was sitting on his pack. Frowning, he walked over to it and picked it up. It was still half-full.

He took a deep breath and gazed around at all of the names covering the wall in front of him. All those people had their names; Pepe, Juanito, Chamuko, Coco.

Patrick survived by wandering from place to place. That was his life now; what he had been before was of no significance now. The name 'Patrick' was as good as dead. The traveller under a bridge in Tijuana then decided that he needed a new name. But what could it be?

The ancient people of Mongolia were called by historians 'the nomadic tribes of Asia?'; they spent their lives wandering eternally around the Gobi Desert, surviving only because they stayed on the move.

*The ancient nomads.*

And this man; he only survived by moving on, and his destination would always be the next town over.

*The modern nomad.*

He raised the can of spray paint, pushed down the little plastic button, and left his mark under that dusty old bridge in Tijuana. As he climbed up the concrete slope and back to the highway, his red paint stood out like fresh blood in the darkness. It read:

*The Modern Nomad*

Passed here, on his way

to everywhere

and to nowhere.

Cheer the life well-lived

and forever mourn every wasted moment

No turning back now?

Welcome to fucking Mexico!

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Since that day, The Modern Nomad hasn't returned to the United States. Apparently, this wasn't just a phase like his parents had hoped.

Upon arrival to the Other Side, he found that he enjoyed Mexico so much that the decision was immediately made to explore more of the country (despite the fact that he was not in possession of a valid passport). After a week south of the border, he had it firmly in his mind to hitch hike all the way to Argentina.

The Modern Nomad drifted down to South America, passing through Mexico during the holiday season and the thin, troubled nations of Central America. He swam illegally across several international rivers, trekked through arid deserts, was marooned in the Caribbean, and swatted mosquitoes and marijuana in the Amazon Rainforest.



He has experienced hunger and thirst, elation, fear, and times of great uncertainty?and he wouldn't have it any other way.

These are his stories.

### **Personal Analysis:**

I am The Modern Nomad, AKA Patrick Falterman, 21, from Houston, Texas. I have hitchhiked about 35.000 kilometres in 14 countries. I've been hitchhiking around Latin America since I was 19. I live in Punta Arenas, Chile, and work as an English teacher. I enjoy writing, and am an aspiring sea kayaker and ex-marathon runner.

### **Countries The Modern Nomad has Hitchhiked in**

United States, Canada, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina

### **Personal Hitchhiking Records**

Longest ride: Osorno, Chile to Punta Arenas, Chile, through Argentina (2.367 km) Furthest hitchhiked in 24 hours: Lima, Peru to Arica, Chile Strangest place ever rode: Between the semi trailer and the semi cab, in Colombia. Strangest thing ever hitchhiked on: Horse. Nicaragua