Coda

A hitch-hiker’s guide to the past

We all romanticize the past. But in some ways at least, I’m certain that life is less safe and spontaneous for my two young children nowadays than it was for me. When I was their age (there, I’ve said it!) I used to disappear with friends for hours to the local park, kicking a ball around, fishing for sticklebacks in the stream, and playing hide and seek in the bushes. I would never dream of letting my own children do this unaccompanied. Nor do I ever see kids under ten roaming freely around north London parks in gangs as we did: a real loss for them.

Another touchstone for me is hitch-hiking. When did you last see a youngster (there, I’ve said that too!) standing by a trunk road, and holding up a sign saying ‘Cambridge’ or ‘The North’? I wonder how many drivers under forty would even recognize what ‘thumbing’ meant. And would teenagers understand the term hitch-hiking at all, except as something fictitious that people do around the galaxy? So far as I’m aware, it has become virtually extinct in Britain. Even in rural Wales, where I spend much of my time, it is many years since I saw anyone hitching a lift, even though most buses only come a couple of times a day, and miss out all the smaller villages. Young people without cars beg a ride from family and friends, stay put, or walk.

I hitch-hiked a lot as a schoolboy and a student. My parents, although not particularly laid back, never seemed very concerned about the risks. Almost everyone of our age went hitching—including young women, usually in pairs. There were often six or seven students waiting for lifts on the slip road to the M1, and a strict etiquette about where you each stood. The main inconvenience of hitch-hiking was never knowing how long a journey would take. Short hops (‘I can take you as far as Watford’) were frustrating, and left you wondering if you should have waited for a better offer. Sometimes you got stuck for the night; I can remember sleeping in the station waiting room in Newcastle, and in a very cold field by the side of the road in Anglesey.

Picking up hitch-hikers wasn’t just altruistic. Many sole drivers—especially long-distance lorry drivers—seemed to appreciate the company and a chat. Hitching back from Scotland during the 1966 World Cup, a friend and I had a lift from Glasgow to Carlisle in the back of a black cab. The cabbie had just taken a fare in the opposite direction, and was happy to celebrate his luck by giving two sixteen-year-olds a free trip south. Experiences like that were common. And hitching wasn’t just something you did in Britain. Most of my friends hitched around Europe, and some did it all over the world. A few managed to hitch to India and back.

I once managed to get home from Florence in just two rides, each of them full of coincidences. First an English couple took me to Milan. Their son, it turned out, had just told them he was engaged to a young woman I knew well at Cambridge. I decided it would be indiscreet to warn them that she was also sleeping with one of my close friends there. The next day, in the toilets on a camp site, I met a bricklayer from Edgware who offered to take me to my parents’ front door. On the way, we stopped in a lay-by outside Strasbourg—one of the great gastronomic centres of the world—so that he and his wife could fry spam and baked beans on a primus stove for lunch. Those were the days.

The peak of my hitch-hiking career was three years earlier, during my gap year, when I hitch-hiked alone round the whole of East Africa. I travelled from Kenya up to northern and western Uganda, then via Kilimanjaro to Dar-es-Salaam and Zanzibar, and back again into Kenya. In retrospect it seems an extraordinary thing to have done, but it surprised no-one at the time. Uganda was known as one of the safest and friendliest countries on earth. In Kampala, foreign travellers commonly stayed in the Sikh temple, as I did. The Asian community there was still thriving, and links with Britain were strong and generally warm. Close to the Rwandan border, a jeep from a local agency passed by me with a sign on the side saying: ‘A gift from the Rotary Club of Potters Bar’.

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During the whole tour, I suffered nothing worse than having a cheap camera stolen from my rucksack, being propositioned by a travelling salesman, having to eject a prostitute politely from a room I had paid for above a bar (she had evidently been included in the price), and getting stuck in a particularly unpleasant village north of Malindi, where there were millions of mosquitoes but no cars for two days. The local MP eventually took me the rest of the way up the dirt road to Lamu, where I begged a flight at the aerodrome back to Mombasa.

What does it say about our world that these experiences are almost certainly no longer possible?

It’s tempting to make generalizations about the planet being a more dangerous and violent place than it was. Yet I doubt if I would have been able to travel like this at any earlier time in history either—alone, with no means of transport of my own, and with very little money. Probably I’m just very lucky to have been young, white and male when there were already enough cars around to get you anywhere you wanted, but not so many that everyone thought you should bloody well buy your own.

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