

# Tips On How to Hitchhike in Japan



With another man also hitchhiking! His partner with him took the photo.

Due to popular request I have complied a list of tips and lessons I learned over the past several years hitchhiking in Japan. I think the basic tip is to use common sense and have the attitude of, "where there's a will, there's a way."

- Get to the a good intersection of the highway that has a **nice long red traffic light** which builds up a good row of vehicles in front of it when the light turns red. Sometimes I walk 3 or 4 kilometers to get to it, sometimes and sometimes I take train or a bus to get to it.
- I usually stand before the traffic light. The longer the light stays red, the better. I stand near the light when it first turns red and wait for the first car to come. When I think the driver is close enough to see the whites of my eyes, I either hold out my thumb or hold out a sign that shows my destination. If the driver either makes no eye contact with me, shows no interest, or waves his or her hand back and forth indicating "NO!", I proceed to walk up to the next car, and then the next, and then the next until either I get a positive response from the driver or the traffic light turns green and the cars begin to move again. When the light turns green, I turn around and walk back to the light and wait till it turns red again.
- Sometimes I'll continue to hold out my sign after the light turns green in spite of the fact the traffic is flowing. Sometimes an interested driver who sees my sign though he passes me by and crosses the intersection will return back for me and offer me a ride. This has happened dozens of times.
- I try to present myself well groomed and dress reasonably well in dress pants and a dress shirt, never in jeans. Sometimes I've hitchhiked wearing a suit and tie but I found it really didn't help much.
- I try to make eye contact with the driver and smile. Once he or she makes eye contact, it usually means a ride.
- I made signs showing my destination with A4 size paper and a thick pointed magic marker. I use a clear plastic holder to keep the signs together with the sign of my destination on top. The sign is written in Japanese ideographs (Kanji).



An example sign written on A4 size paper in a plastic folder with other signs below the top sign.

Usually I'll carry the marker and several blank sheets of A4 paper in the plastic holder if I need to make a sign of a new destination. The driver is usually happy to write the Kanji down for me. I can copy Japanese characters if I look at them, but the Japanese will write them much nicer than I can. □ Since 2016 I started using larger binded sketchbooks to make signs. One advantage is the pages are bound and will not fly away in the wind as A4 pages can. I write one kanji on a page and hold the sketchbook open showing two pages. The names of most cities and prefectures in Japan consist of two kanjis. The sign is therefore larger and easier to see from a far distance.



A3 page in a binder can be used for signs.

- A sign should not show a destination that is too far away. On a regular road the destination should be not further than the next major city. The exception to this rule is if your destination is the largest city among all the cities you will be passing. Some examples: Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, and Niigata.
- At expressway entrances, try to stand at a safe place before the entrance where the cars can easily stop. There are good expressway entrances to hitchhike at, and poor ones. How do you know the difference? By experience!
- If after you catch a ride from a driver entering the expressway who is going toward the direction of your destination but considerably short of it, have him drop you off at the largest service area that is before his exit point. Service areas are better than expressway entrances because the flow of traffic is always in the direction you want to go. I stand near the facilities on the side of the road where cars would pass when exiting. If you are too obvious or stand too close to the exit ramp, the traffic cops might tell you to leave when they see you.