

Travels with a Road Dog: Hitchhiking Along the Roads of the Americas

R.K.

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In hitchhiker jargon, road dogs are people who live on the road all the time. The title of author R.K.'s memoir about hitchhiking for four years also refers to her canine companion, Jambo. *Travels with a Road Dog: Hitchhiking Along the Roads of the Americas* gives readers the nitty-gritty about how the author procured survival basics and offers vignettes about the people (including NFL quarterback John Elway and author Shel Silverstein) and sights she encountered throughout the United States, Mexico, the Bahamas, and Venezuela.

In 1993 R.K. went to her first encampment with the Rainbow Gathering. This loosely organized counterculture group meets at different national parks where members hike, camp, meditate, dance, and make music. The book gives outsiders an intimate look at the Rainbow lifestyle, and R.K. relates many interesting stories about herbal healing, drumming, cooking, and wilderness skills. She also relates the less-than-wonderful details about the group, such as the "Drainbows" who don't contribute to the communal meals or activities, comments from Rainbow men who feel that she would best serve the group by getting pregnant, the mountains of trash left behind after these nature-oriented events, and the hazards of head lice, giardia, and scabies.

Rainbow followers often intersected with fans of the Grateful Dead, and R.K. sometimes hitched along with Deadheads to concert sites to work and sell her crocheted hats, though she is not particularly a fan of Jerry Garcia and his bandmates. She hitchhiked with a pair of Deadheads and eventually ended up in Key West where she perfected her panhandling, or "spanging," skills.

The author has a matter-of-fact tone and writes clearly, if somewhat dispassionately, about her travels. The most lyrical parts of the book are found in her descriptions of the months she spent hitchhiking with Jambo and her boyfriend throughout Mexico. Adjusting to the flatter terrain around the Gulf Coast city of Coatzacoalcos, she notes: "For several days I couldn't look at the sky without feeling dizzy, and in the evenings, because there were no city lights around, we could see what looked like millions of stars twinkling in the sky. It seemed as though a giant bowl of pinpoint lights had been turned upside down over the planet and placed on our heads."

Without benefit of a map, the three road dogs continued their way around Mexico, and the author relates many examples of generosity from the mostly poor locals, which contrast with the fact that they routinely help themselves to crops from the fields. While the reader may not approve of this attitude or the author's lifestyle, R.K. does so much soul-searching and reflecting that the memoir becomes a meaningful coming-of-age account.

Typos and mentions of thanking someone profusely crop up a bit too regularly. The inner margins are also too slender to allow for reading without cracking the spine of the book.

Travels with a Road Dog is an entertaining armchair travel book for those who are less intrepid than the author, but who still have some wanderlust in their hearts. Other readers will be fascinated by her accounts of Rainbow Gathering, Deadhead, and hitchhiker subcultures. In an era when everyone seems to be hardwired to his or her cell phone or laptop, it is refreshing to read about such an adventurous yet simply lived journey.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (November 28, 2012)

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