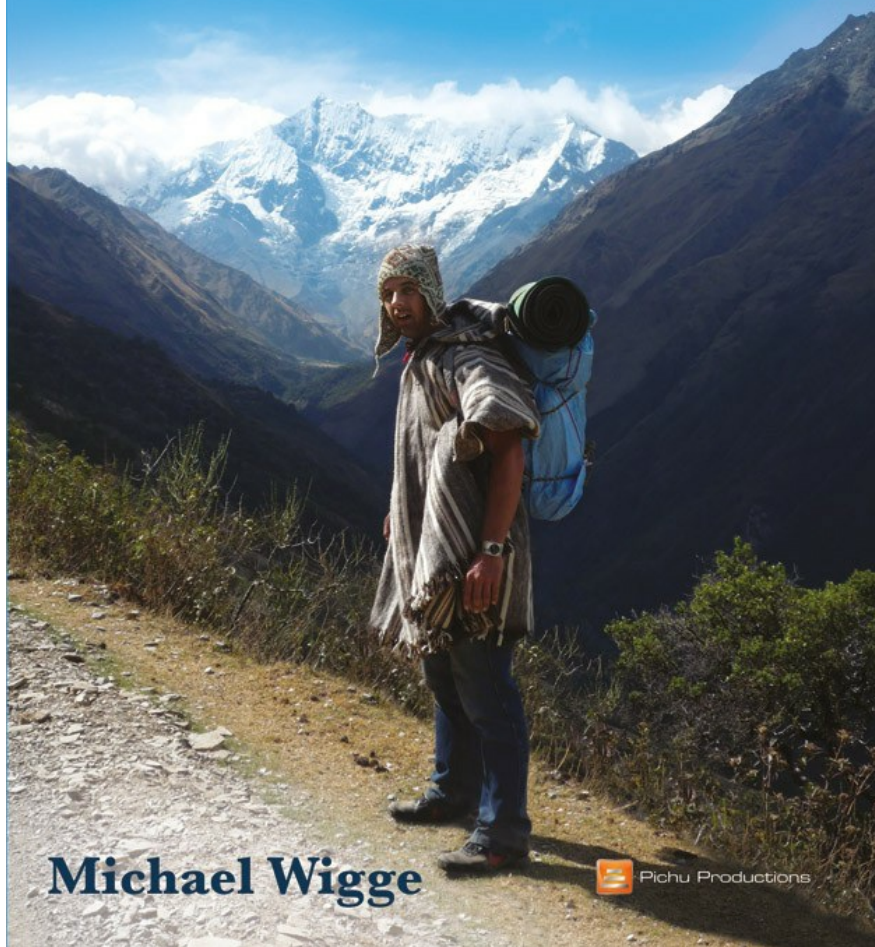


HOW TO TRAVEL THE WORLD FOR FREE

I did it, and you can do it, too!



Michael Wigge


 Pichu Productions

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MICHAEL WIGGE

How to Travel
the World
for FREE

I did it, and you can do it, too!

About the Book

Is it really possible to travel from Berlin to Antarctica without a single cent in your pocket?

Michael Wigge is on the adventure of a lifetime, where even simple necessities become a challenge. What will he eat? Where will he sleep? How will he get from place to place? Every day, these questions (among others) will occupy his thoughts.

Right from the outset, his journey hits the ground running with action and excitement, from playing hide-and-seek with ticket agents on the train to being put to work on a container ship while crossing the Atlantic Ocean to Canada. And this is just the beginning of his trip!

Who will he meet along the way? And—most importantly—how will he get across North and South America to reach Antarctica, his final destination?

This book is full of surprises; some more pleasant than others. Nevertheless, it's an adventure you won't want to miss!

About the Author

Author and journalist Michael Wigge began his career as an anchor for the German VIVA program *London Calling* in 2002. Since then, the world has been his newsroom and playground, whether he is living with the native Yanomami Indian tribe in the Amazon rain forest, taking the longest recorded donkey ride in the history of music television, or fighting Sumo wrestlers in Japan.

Whether reporting from prison for MTV or entering Buckingham Palace solemnly attired as King Henry VIII, Wigge has always thrown himself into the most unusual of situations.

Michael Wigge's most recent adventure involved traveling throughout 14 different countries with the goal of turning a half-eaten apple into a dream home in Hawaii, using only the bartering system. Prior to this, Wigge's other globetrotting escapade found him journeying from Europe to the Americas to, finally, Antarctica (literally the end of the world) without a penny to his name.

Wigge currently lives in Berlin, Germany, but far prefers to be on the move.

1/ Even Basic Needs Aren't Free (Berlin to Antwerp)

It is the 21st of June, which means it is officially the summer solstice, and the longest day of the year. I can actually feel this all over my body. For more than three hours, I have been standing at a freeway exit trying to continue my journey towards Cologne. Thinking of the 25,000 miles I still have yet to cover, it's hard to imagine that five months from now, I will actually set foot on Antarctica—*the end of the world*, as my friends would say—without having a single penny in my pocket.

It may be the longest day of the year, but it also feels like the hottest day of the year: this, together with the equipment on my back, makes the sweat pour down my overheated body like a nasty waterfall. The sun is laughing at me; the cars that pass by also, somehow, snicker with amusement. I'm hitchhiking with a sign on my back that reads *The End of the World!*, so this could possibly have something to do with it. But none of this bothers me, since my mind is already far, far away in Antarctica.

At some point, what I count as the 2,420th car whooshes past me. You see, I have noted eleven cars driving past me about every minute, bringing me to a total of 2,420 cars in exactly 220 minutes—amazing what the mind can do in the

heat. If one is optimistic enough to believe what *Lonely Planet* says about Germany being a hitchhiker-friendly country, then one will likely wait for as long as I have been waiting.

Discouraged and soaked with my own perspiration, my Antarctic visions completely dashed, I am just about to give up and call it a day when a red van pulls up. The driver's side window rolls down and a grumbling voice calls out, "Need a ride?"

Arndt and Marius are returning from a convention of Leftists in Berlin. I now sit in their backseat telling them about my crazy plan of reaching Antarctica without having a solitary cent in my pocket. However, as I talk, I realize that I am in desperate need of relief. After being in the sun all day, one would think that I would actually be dehydrated, not needing to expend excess liquid, but my bladder is calling and Marius is kind enough to make a pit stop in my honor. I run as fast as I can to the public toilet, only to be blocked by a gate with a sign that reads: *50 cents*.

Before starting this trip, I had thought of all the possible scenarios that might require money and how to get around them, but even I have to admit that this is one I didn't take into consideration at all. Something like this should be free anyways, shouldn't it? Desperate, I try charming the toilet attendant—not as easy a task as it may sound. I tell her that I have no money, that this is an emergency, and if she could

just find it in her heart to let me pass through just this once, *just this one time*, my appreciation would be boundless.

“Get a job.”

Knowing that there is no way to convince her, I instead find a few nice bushes around the corner. When I get back to the van, I tell Arndt and Marius about my little... situation. They are both fired up after the convention and effortlessly compare my problem to that of society’s class struggles. “You wouldn’t find anything like this in socialism!” rants Marius. He’s probably right, actually. Maybe socialism isn’t so bad after all.

Finally, we reach the first stop on my trip: Cologne, the city in which I lived and worked for six years. From here, the plan is to travel to Belgium, where a container ship is waiting to take me across to Canada. Since the ship won’t set sail for five days, I can make use of this time to visit some old friends. However, I’m not completely without ulterior motives: I’m hoping that by catching up with them, I’ll also have a free place to crash for the next few nights.

My friend, Hardy, lives with his girlfriend in a perfectly pleasant garden bungalow near the edge of the city, and when I ring his doorbell, I am greeted warmly and immediately offered a comfy couch to stay on—an offer I swiftly accept. As I tell him about my first day, my stomach demands attention by beginning to audibly growl, but Hardy’s refrigerator is as empty as my stomach.

We both start wondering where we can get something to eat at this late hour. Now, luckily, some supermarkets in Cologne are still open in the late evening, which is a simple solution if you have money. However, I'm not traveling with any whatsoever, and don't want to ask too much of Hardy's hospitality, so I have another idea:

Dumpster diving it is, then.

A humble act of foraging that apparently originated in the U.S., dumpster diving is new to Germany, and involves getting—quite literally—down and dirty as you search for food in a supermarket's dumpsters. The food is often perfectly edible, if not good, but is simply no longer sellable either due to its expiration date or its not-entirely-appetizing appearance.

I take the local train downtown, which is free for me but which still requires a ticket. (Like in many German cities, public transportation in Cologne allows students and employed monthly ticket holders to participate in a public rideshare, permitting them to take another person along on their pass free of cost, but only after seven in the evening.) Since most shops in the city are closed by now, it will be the perfect time for my...shopping expedition. I set off for the largest supermarket near the city's park, almost more curious than hungry to see if dumpster diving is possible here in Cologne.

Tiptoeing like a burglar and armed with just a flashlight

and some plastic bags, I ease behind the building and stand in front of the gate to the supermarket's courtyard. From here I can see the dumpsters, and, motivated by my growling tummy, I somehow manage to climb over the six-foot tall fence. I flash the light into the first dumpster and I nearly die of terror: the beam lands directly onto the face of a man.

“Hey, wait your turn!” he snaps.

I eventually learn that this man is named Peter, and that he studies social work in Cologne. For years now he has been looking for food in this manner—not because of a shortage of money, but because of his ideological refusal of consumption.

“*Freeganism* comes from the word *free* and means free of cost—much in the same way that veganism and vegan relate,” explains Peter as he picks out his culinary treasures. “There are proper Freegan scenes here in Cologne. We meet regularly and cook together.” Peter gets by with 200 Euros a month, which mainly is for his insurance costs. He gets his food from dumpsters and lives in a construction trailer.

After filling his backpack, Peter lets me have my way with the dumpster. As I fill my bags with yogurt, sausage, bread, cheese, milk, and even some gummy bears, Peter explains to me that, unlike other countries, dumpster diving is actually illegal in Germany. “Even garbage has an

owner in this country,” he says, “so legally and technically, what we are engaged in here is good old-fashioned *theft*. A few years ago a woman in Cologne was sentenced to do social work, all because she took yogurt from a supermarket dumpster.”

It turns out to be a lucky night for Peter and me, meaning we don't get caught. Even Hardy is astonished when I surprise him with two plastic bags full of food.

The next day, I decide it's time to go to work. I stand in the city's main pedestrian area holding a rather enticing handmade sign: *A butler for a train ticket*. In order to make my offer more attractive, I'm dressed up as an English butler with a bow tie, white shirt with starched collar, button-down vest, black trousers, and white gloves, all of which I had purchased from a second-hand shop (for just 15 Euros!) before leaving Berlin. Who could resist my impeccable butlership?

I expect more of a reaction—any kind of reaction—from the people of Cologne. However, the residents appear to be no longer easily amused, thanks to all the hidden-camera antics and wacky street performers that have begun to take root in the city. After an hour with no success, I decide to take control of the situation and address the passersby directly.

“A train ticket to Belgium in exchange for the best butler in the world!” I confidently exclaim to an old lady

who crosses my path, bowing slightly to demonstrate my charm.

“I am in no mood for a circus today!” she retorts, adding a few arm gestures for emphasis.

The embarrassing confrontations continue until I approach one of the more interesting-looking citizens of Cologne, a man I soon learn is named Harold who is 49 years old, but eternally young at heart. Against his suntanned skin he wears a white, open, laced-up vest tucked into tight pants, a look that is finished off neatly with a pair of snakeskin boots. His thinning blond hair is long and partly covered by a headband. He likes my idea, and for the rest of the day, books me as his personal butler.

When we arrive at his place, the first thing I see is a red Ferrari parked in front of his house—or, to put it better, in front of his property. Harold tells me that he bought the car in the 90s for 400,000 Deutschmarks (DM), the old currency of Germany. Now, I am not a car fanatic by any means, but I’m still impressed with an actual *Ferrari*.

Harold quickly thrusts a sponge and cloth into my hand saying, “Now wash the car until it’s spic-and-span!” Dutifully, I place the cleaning rag against the rim in order to make it shine, sending Harold into a complete panic.

“Be careful! Ferraris have been damaged from being cleaned in the wrong way! Do it gently! Never, ever on the same spot for too long!” Harold knows exactly what he

wants. Hopefully, I won't get sued. A butler's life must be full of incalculable risks.

Two hours later Harold takes me to his garage, which is actually a separate portion of a public parking block. In the garage there are many, many more luxury vehicles: shiny Lamborghinis, gleaming Corvettes, majestic Cadillacs... am I dreaming, or have I, in fact, hooked up with the Russian mafia?

Harold selects a Cadillac convertible from the seventies that must be at least sixteen feet long. I then chauffeur him throughout downtown Cologne, despite the challenge of taking curves with this gigantic car. After successfully parking the Cadillac, we dine at a fancy restaurant...or, to be more accurate, Harold dines while I keep replenishing his wine glass. Again and again during the course of the evening, various women approach our table. Harold seems to attract a certain type of woman; the kind who is even willing to kiss his eccentric boots for a bit of his attention.

They look right through me. I continue pouring wine for Harold.

The remainder of my day as Harold's butler passes quite amusingly. Unfortunately, I never do find out how Harold has made his vast fortune. He tells me that he has no money, but lives only from objects of value. The twenty sports cars he has parked in his garage have already

assured me of this. After finishing my duties, Harold invites me to Marbella, Spain, for the coming week, and adds a cryptic tag:

“You could marry well there.”

Though I’m curious to know what he means, I know it is time to press on. I politely decline his intriguing invitation and receive 55 Euros for my pay: exactly enough money for a ticket to Antwerp, Belgium. Thankfully, it also means that I will be able to make my free passage to Canada, something that was more difficult to find than I had anticipated.

EU (European Union) law not only discourages, but prohibits anyone’s romantic notions of becoming a sailor; luckily, I know a solid man by the name of Peter Doehle whose shipping company rather enterprisingly offers a certain brand of tourist the option of traveling on a container ship. Since he considers my project quite exciting, he is allowing me to travel free of cost.

On the train ride to Belgium, I decide to save my 55 Euros for later and don’t buy a ticket. My brilliant plan is to hide in the restroom for the entire trip. I can already visualize myself triumphantly disembarking from the train in Antwerp with 55 Euros still in my pocket, not having spent a single cent. While hidden in the toilet, I smile and congratulate myself on my genius plan until I hear the frantic knocking on the door. Caught by the conductor I not

only have to pay the normal fare but also a penalty fee to boot, meaning that I arrive in Brussels with only one Euro left.

Everything up to now has been going so well, but then I tried to be too clever. As a result, I'm now stuck here in Brussels with no idea of how to get to Antwerp. My backpack feels even heavier on my burdened shoulders. I am not sure of what to do, when I suddenly think of one solution: I will board the next train to Antwerp and use the blind-spot trick.

Yes, the blind-spot trick.

I go immediately to the last compartment, which is only about ten by twelve feet, containing only six folding seats. In most of the local trains, the bicycles are usually kept here. I put my backpack in the left corner that faces the other compartments, and stand motionless in the right corner facing the same direction. Normally, the conductors only glance through the window of this compartment's door, and if they don't see anyone, they move on, not thinking to check the blind spots.

(Ladies and gentlemen: the blind-spot trick.)

I spend the rest of the journey tensely pushed up against the right corner of the compartment. Suddenly, the door opens and I have only one thought: *Busted again!* It is not the conductor, or any sort of train official, but a waiter coming through with the coffee cart.

The young man observes me standing there scrunched up in the corner. We both stand there looking at each other for a few seconds without saying a word.

I keep looking at him. He looks right back at me. I think we're saying things with our minds, but I can't be too sure.

I nonchalantly try to act as if I'm just standing there to gaze out of the window, perhaps even propping my chin up on my fist and managing a small smile. The young waiter pushes his coffee cart to the other side of the compartment and proceeds to fix himself some lemonade while keeping his eyes on me—he knows exactly what's going on. I continue staring out the window with an expression of wonder, though I'm not paying a bit of attention to the scenery.

After a few minutes, the waiter pushes the coffee cart back out of the compartment, barely hiding a smile. I arrive in Antwerp both overjoyed by success, and utterly exhausted from holding myself in that position for almost an hour.

My next challenge is to find some food. What if I approach, say, five different shops, and simply explain to them that I am traveling to the end of the world without any money and ask if they would donate some food for my cause? How many of them do will say yes? It's worth a try. So I first approach a nice café run by a young man. He thinks my adventure sounds great, and offers me a coffee

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