LOW INCOME
HIGH FREEDOM
DEEP PURPOSE
DIRTBAG
RICH
BLAKE BOLES

DIRTBAG RICH

INTRODUCTION

by Blake Boles

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No glamour here – just dirtbag riches

Hi, I'm Blake.

I'm not wealthy or famous.

I don't have a house, car, spouse, child, advanced degree, or prestigious title.

I lack many things that others my age possess.

What I do have is my own little version of the good life: one overflowing with freedom, nature, travel, adventure, friends, and romance.

For almost two decades now I've worked just a few months each year. The rest of the time I spend reading, writing, hiking, biking, dancing, thinking, traveling, dreaming, and conversing.

I'm not subsidized by my family or the government. Nor did I sell a company, ride the stock market, go viral, traffic human organs, or take an online course revealing *the one secret that will make all your financial dreams come true*.

Rather, I found a form of work that I genuinely enjoy. Work that does good, pays well, and doesn't monopolize my life.

"Found" isn't really the right word. I stumbled, sweat, tinkered, and charmed my way into this work. Year after year, I do it all again. Nothing is guaranteed, but this energizes me.

I don't have a permanent residence. At various points, all of my possessions have fit into a small storage unit, the back of a car, or a few plastic bins. When I tire of migrating, I settle down for a few months or longer. Then I pick up and move on, in pursuit of the

people, nature, and activities I cherish most. No one place holds my heart. I am geographically polyamorous.

Relationships are my first safety net. Good health is my second. Savings are my third.

I may not earn much, but compared to how I spend, it's a ton.

I'm not conventionally rich. I'm dirtbag rich.

What's a dirtbag?

The first dirtbags were hardcore rock climbers in Yosemite Valley who camped illegally, showered infrequently, and scavenged for meals. When they needed money, they'd leave the Valley to paint houses, wait tables, teach skiing, or even take a desk job: anything to refill their coffers and get back to the big walls. They lived like bums in pursuit of the good life.

Today dirtbags come in many flavors, not just "climber" and "white male." Some are trail runners, mountain bikers, long-distance hikers, backcountry skiers, cross-country cyclists, or endless-summer surfers. Others are dancers, slackliners, acroyogis, or perpetual travelers. All are passionate. All are extreme. None are what the mainstream would describe as balanced.

Some dirtbags live in vans, trucks, or tents. Others couchsurf, hitchhike, or stay with friends. Some do pay rent: just not very much, and not for very long. For dirtbags, full-time, full-price rental contracts lie somewhere between a luxury and an obscenity.

Many dirtbags come from middle-class security. Some come from upper-class privilege. Others come from next to nothing.

All dirtbags adore nature, movement, fitness, and thrift. All struggle to fit into conventional society. All want to be left alone to do what they love, while they also yearn for membership in a tight-knit community of the similarly obsessed.

Many who lead such lives aren't aware of the label "dirtbag," and of those that are, many don't welcome its associations. I understand their aversion but like the term myself. To me, being a dirtbag simply means that you're too busy following your bliss to worry about a little dirt under your nails. It means you're doing something right.

Dirtbagging is unsustainable – as is normal life

Unfortunately, dirtbagging is unsustainable in the long run.

Traveling, adventuring, and living close to nature are undoubtedly fun and fulfilling—until you get seriously ill or injured, need to sleep or eat better, require comprehensive health insurance, fall in love with someone who's not a dirtbag, want to save for retirement, or want to start a family. Normal life and its promise of security starts to look awfully attractive when the wheels come off your vehicle or finding shelter becomes a real issue.

Unfortunately, normal life is also unsustainable in the long run.

If a dirtbag life calls to you, attempts to live normally are a brutal reminder of why you cannot accept the full-time job, the boss, the commute, the meetings, the bureaucracy, the accumulation of junk, the normalization of debt, and the never-ending postponing of life.

Your body rebels against all the sitting: at desks, in cars, on trains. Your mind rejects the barrage of advertisements and entertainments, the chorus of phones buzzing and vibrating, the

endless splitting of attention. Even among friends and romantic partners you feel isolated and alienated. You might fit in, but you know you're out of place. You sense that something vital is being eroded, precious possibilities are being erased, and that you are growing old at an unacceptably early age. Despite a growing bank account, you feel neither wealthy nor secure. You feel like a fraud.

The cycle begins

I know what it's like to feel at loose ends. By age 24, I had failed at both dirtbagging and normal life.

Straight out of college I landed a job at Astrocamp, an outdoor education center in the mountains of southern California. I got paid to take 5th-graders hiking, swing them on ropes through the forest, weave stories about the evolution of the universe, and conduct mad-scientist experiments like freezing pennies with liquid nitrogen and smashing them to bits with a hammer.

As someone who loved nature, science, and working with kids, I was sure I'd found my dream job. But after just a few months, the repetitiveness wore me down. As soon as I got to know one student group, a bus whisked them away and another took their place, and I was back to square one, saying the same things I had just said last week.

My gaze drifted toward the nearby Pacific Crest Trail, the famed walking path from Mexico to Canada. I had the gear and the guidebook, and with my discontent growing and spring around the corner, I had a reason to go. I gave a week's notice, hugged my co-workers goodbye, and hitched a ride to the Mexican border.

I'd never quit a job on such short notice. Part of me felt ashamed, but a larger part felt relieved. I had escaped the first hint of monotonous

drudgery in my adult career. Now I was pursuing a higher calling: hiking for five straight months through the deserts, forests, and mountains of California, Oregon, and Washington. Transcendent wilderness bliss, here I come!

Two weeks later, I quit the Pacific Crest Trail.

Despite the audiobooks I devoured and fellow hikers I befriended, it didn't take long for my romantic vision of immersion in pure nature to crumble. The hiking itself was manageable. What I couldn't handle was the monotony, disconnection from society, and unbearable stickiness of my sweaty, sunscreen-caked skin.

Under Interstate 10, I hugged my hiker friends goodbye, hopped a train to the East Coast, and joined my brother working at a summer camp in Pennsylvania. The cycle had begun.

Final steps on the Pacific Crest Trail

A love of flight

Soon I began quitting almost everything that I started. After returning from the East Coast, I moved to South Lake Tahoe and committed to work a full year at a health food café. A month later, I left to teach snowboarding at a ski resort. A week later, I quit that job too, struck by the realization that I would spend an entire winter on the same handful of beginner runs.

I didn't even tell my boss when I left the snowboard school. I turned off my cell phone and drove the length of California, returning three days later after sleeping in my car at a gas station in Los Angeles and making a foolish, late-season attempt to hike Mount Whitney.

Back in South Lake Tahoe, my roommate Morgan hugged me and cried. "What happened?" she asked. "I don't know," I said, shaking my head. "I just had to go."

Growing up I was always the good boy, the straight-A student, and the hard worker. Now I was in danger of becoming a full-blown flake. I wasn't even sticking to the things I thought I wanted most, like hiking the PCT or becoming a snowboard instructor. Why was this happening? Was it because of my multi-household, multiple-divorce upbringing? Reading too much Kerouac? Some deep-seated fragility not even I was aware of?

I dreamed of pulling a Christopher McCandless and parking my car along a Forest Service road, walking into the woods, and living in a tent with a bag of rice and stack of books until I made sense of life. But there was no rationalizing this impulse to flee. It would arrive seemingly from nowhere, like a tsunami. The calm seas of my life would recede, replaced by a towering wave of emotion, sweeping away whatever plans I had made.

I resolved to take another outdoor education job and definitely not quit. Which I did—until I returned for another season only to find myself engulfed in another wave of panic. I left that job within 24 hours of the tsunami, placing a handwritten letter on my boss's doorstep, secured by a large rock to prevent the desert winds from bearing it away. It read:

Dear Brett,
I quit. I'm sorry.
-Blake

Speeding north on Interstate 5, my heart raced with guilt, relief, and confusion. I was free again, but to what end? To make another commitment from which I would walk away? Whenever I spent too long in one place, the same feelings returned: *This is a trap. Flee, now!* To ignore these impulses felt like settling, and to settle was some unthinkable sin.

Flipping through the Lonely Planet guidebook *South America on a Shoestring* in a Seattle bookstore, I was reminded that as the northern days contracted, a southern summer dawned. I closed my eyes and imagined leaving the darkness behind in a streak of contrails.

Everything was happier in the summer. Everything worked in the summer. The only jobs I reliably held were summer camp jobs. When a college friend told me he was going to Buenos Aires, I took it as a sign. I had failed to realize my dirtbag dreams, and I was failing as a productive member of society. Whatever I needed to learn, I wasn't learning here. To escape this samsara, I had to make a break for it. I bought a one-way ticket to Ecuador with plans to meet my friend a few months later.

My mom cried as she dropped me off at the airport. “Will I ever see you again?” she asked. “Of course,” I told her. All I really knew was that I had to go far, far away.

A different way

The next three months I hugged the spine of the Andes, moving steadily southward on the gringo trail. The ocean waves thrashed me in Máncora, the garbage trucks serenaded me in Arequipa, the salt flats mesmerized me in Uyuni, and the border crossing mystified me at La Quiaca. I fell for a Swiss woman in Perú, a Canadian woman in Bolivia, and the entire female adult population of Argentina. I searched for orcas on the Valdés Peninsula, discovered chocolate-coated nirvana in Bariloche, lost sleep in a 20-bed dorm in Buenos Aires, and found solace in a café cortado the morning after. Forehead pressed to the windows of long-distance buses, the fog in my brain evaporated, and I began to outline of a new way forward: one that combined the dirtbag virtues of freedom, passion, and thrift with some of normal life’s promised riches.

Flying back to California broke, tan, and happy, I lined up another string of outdoor education, summer camp, and ski resort jobs. But I already knew I wouldn’t return to my old life for very long. South America had shown me what it was like to feel constantly in love rather than constantly trapped. This had to become the new normal, not the exception.

Working to achieve basic financial independence was important to me. I didn’t want to become a parasite or grifter. Yet I was clearly allergic to traditional, full-time employment. Even the famous 5-week vacations of Silicon Valley and Scandinavia now struck me as laughably short, yoked as they were to 40-hour (or longer) work-weeks. If I wanted to take another long international journey,

multi-week backpacking trip, or spontaneous hike on a sunny weekday, I would not be denied. I was the owner of my life, and I would not let an employer dictate its terms.

I craved geographic flexibility. With family and friends scattered across North America, staying in any one place year-round meant sacrificing face-time with many I loved. Despite my sudden break-up with the PCT, I remained enamored with the mountains, forests, and deserts of the American west, wanting to explore every nook and cranny. And escaping the northern winter for a southern summer had shown me that my sun-spoiled California soul need not suffer when the days grew short. Remaining mobile and untethered, I realized, would allow me to maintain my relationships, connection to wilderness, and climate-sensitive mental health.

Finally, my inner activist had reawakened. Three months of contemplation on Perú's overnight buses, inside Argentina's posh cafés, and amidst Bolivia's desolate beauty revealed a deep, obsessive need to fight for a social cause. In my case, this meant investigating and promoting alternatives to the creativity-crushing American school system: a mission I pursued passionately in college and subsequently neglected in early adulthood. My heart began telling me, gently but firmly, that some form of social activism must take center stage.

In the year that followed my South American escape, my 25th on Earth, I began to map out a vision of a future I might not just tolerate but whole-heartedly embrace:

- If I rejected permanent residence in favor of a life on the road, I could stay close to friends, family, nature, sunshine, and the spirit of adventure.

- If I worked hard, spent little, and grew my savings without resorting to a full-time job, I could pass as a "productive member of society" while avoiding burn-out.
- If I put an important social cause at the center of my life, I might finally have a strong enough reason to break the cycle of committing, quitting, and fleeing.

Many questions remained. How could I earn enough while only working part-time? How would I manage without a home base? What if I wanted a family? And beneath them all: What if I was making a giant, life-shattering mistake by not swallowing my discomfort, burying these impossible desires, and getting on with a normal existence?

I knew that every path has trade-offs. If I lived for adventure, I might not have kids. If I had kids, I'd certainly take fewer adventures. Travel would change me, just as rootedness would change me. Working for myself might be the best thing I ever do, and turning my passion into a business might suffocate it. No one can have it all. But maybe, just maybe, I could have more than the world promised.

About this book

In the 15+ years since I made that fateful decision, I've learned much about what it takes to become dirtbag rich. I've tweaked, refined, and pressure-tested my ideas in the mountains of New Zealand, on the highways of North America, and among the capital cities of Europe.

What do I mean by *dirtbag rich*? Currently I define it this way:

> a low-income, high-freedom lifestyle
> filled with nature, movement, and connection
> fueled by purposeful, well-paid, part-time work

Your version of dirtbag rich won't exactly match mine. We have different histories, personalities, aptitudes, and blind spots. What "meaningful" means to you will differ from what it means to me, and that's okay. What matters are the fundamentals.

As I stumbled toward dirtbag riches in my twenties and early thirties, I did not follow any particular formula or philosophy. Rather, I drew inspiration from the people I met, the books I read, and the solitudes of travel, wilderness, and journaling. Choosing this path meant encountering more than my fair share of charismatic figures who promised that my life would become amazing if I would only sell my possessions, start my own company, build passive income, become a digital nomad, or retire early. Each possessed some slice of the truth, but many lacked humility and intellectual honesty. I do not intend to contribute to this tradition. While this book is firmly rooted in my personal experience, it also contains stories and perspectives from others who have found their own balance of security, meaning, and adventure.

Whenever I pick up a book that offers life advice, I ask myself: *Do the author's struggles, hang-ups, and neuroses match my own?* If so, then maybe I have something useful to discover here.

In this spirit, here are some of the struggles, hang-ups, and neuroses I've navigated for most of my life:

- I feel more at home in transition than settled.
- What I call a love of freedom others seem to consider a disorder.
- I'm a lifelong skeptic of marriage—even as a child I said I'd prefer a civil union.

- Movement, travel, and exercise are how I cope with sadness, boredom, and grief.
- I've always needed to feel special, different, in charge of my life, and not a pawn in someone else's game.
- I cannot bear the thought that if I died unexpectedly tomorrow, I would have spent most of my adulthood sitting indoors, working on something I don't believe in.

If this feels familiar, maybe you will discover something useful here.

Let's begin.

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