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# TIME

FROM THE MAGAZINE

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## Hitchhiking In Cyberspace

The joys--and dangers--of finding a ride home on the Web

By CAROLYN SAYRE

Need a ride home for the holidays? Hitchhiking may have fallen out of favor, but a new form of ride sharing has emerged to replace it on--where else?--the Web. Today tens of thousands of Americans go online every month to stick a virtual thumb out in cyberspace, especially during holiday travel seasons.

[Craigslist.org](http://Craigslist.org)--the largest ride-sharing forum--expects to receive a 50% increase in requests from users hoping to catch a ride home for Thanksgiving dinner. And why not? As a mode of travel, it's cheap, fuel efficient and relatively safe (more on that later). Besides, says Jim Buckmaster, CEO of Craigslist, "it's an adventure."

Ride sharing on Craigslist is basically an electronic version of the bulletin boards you find on most college campuses. People seeking rides say where they want to go, and drivers with room to spare arrange a place to meet. Craigslist, which requires no membership and charges no fee, fields 20,000 ride-sharing posts in a typical month, a number that swells to 30,000 during peak travel times.

To meet the growing demand, more than a dozen major ride-sharing sites have sprung up, many of them quite sophisticated. Some allow users to sort by age, gender, type of car, smoking or smoke-free travel and even music preferences. At [Carpoolworld.com](http://Carpoolworld.com) you enter your destination, and the site spits out a list of registered users headed your way. [Ridester.com](http://Ridester.com) one of the fastest-growing sites, with 11,000 unique users since August, will send you a text message when a potential match arises. It will also hit you with a \$2 surcharge for each transaction and take 9.5% of the driver's fee.

How much are those fees? That depends on what kind of deal you can strike. When Ridester's overhead is factored in, a trip from Phoenix, Ariz., to Los Angeles arranged on the site would cost you \$37, about \$12 less than Greyhound and at least \$100 less than Amtrak.

Ride sharing generally affords more companionship than a train or bus trip. But that can be a plus or a minus, depending on the quality of your companions. A disclaimer on [eRideShare.com](http://eRideShare.com) reads, "Please keep in mind that there are crazies out there. Don't travel with someone you don't trust." While the American Automobile Association (AAA) encourages carpooling with someone you know, it warns against ride sharing when you don't know who is behind the wheel. "You're hooking up with a perfect stranger," says Robert Sinclair Jr., a spokesman for AAA. "Beyond the fact that they could kidnap you and rob you, you don't know how good of a driver they are and what kind of insurance they have."

Ride-sharing sites like Ridester have tried to alleviate safety concerns by requiring users to register and instituting a feedback system in which passengers can rate the quality of their driver. The site also offers an escrow account that holds a passenger's carpooling fee until the transaction is completed. It's no guarantee, admits Jake Boshernitzan, CEO of Ridester. "We are not able to ensure the safety of our riders, just like an online-dating

site can't guarantee the safety of someone you meet," he says.

Legally, ride-sharing services avoid the regulations that govern for-hire businesses like taxicabs by forbidding drivers to solicit requests for passengers. If the business grows--and if there are some high-profile incidents--that could change. "It's a gray area," says Paul Angenend, an attorney specializing in transportation law. "If you ride-share 20 times a month, then you're in the for-hire business."

For now the best advice is the one your mother would give: Don't get into a car with perfect strangers, and if their driving makes you uncomfortable, ask them to drop you at the nearest bus or train station.

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