So you have found yourself living in your car or van? There are lots of things you can do to make your life easier, some of which will cost almost nothing. Keep in mind that while two thirds of the world’s population has no electricity and many have no running water, you don’t have to live like that. Outsource what you can. If you can locate public toilets/showers, libraries, public laundries, barbecues and shelters you can cook, shower, wash, do laundry and charge your appliances outside the vehicle. Where you can, use stuff you have, avoid buying new.

Your vehicle provides you with electricity, you just need to learn how to use it. You should have an auxiliary outlet or cigarette lighter that you can use to power things. You can buy small and cheap USB chargers that will let you charge a mobile phone or a USB light. These cost $1-$5. You can even buy car laptop power supplies for less than $10 on eBay or a bit more from auto stores. To power those you might want to use a multiple outlet adaptor like the one on the right. Note it has 3 outlets and a USB outlet. Another useful thing to have is a LED light so you can have light at night. If you can afford it, buy a rechargeable so you won’t have to run it from your outlet at night.

Most cars produce a lot of electricity when the engine runs, so you can easily power a laptop, light, phone charger and a small fan while the engine is running. It would be best to avoid using power when the engine is off but you can run most small LED lights all night with no issues. Also search the web for “Dual battery isolator”.

Water can be stored in large plastic jugs. Ever seen those big bottles used in water bubblers? Grab one. Brought water in a large bottle or container? Use those. Store water in plastic containers, make sure they have a lid or are secured well for travel. Use rope or really tight straps to secure them so they don’t spill. You can buy cheap hand pumps like the one on the right from caravan supplies stores for about $30. With a bit of food quality hose and a container to store water in you can easily have water on demand. A stainless steel bowl serves very well as a sink.

Cooking and heating water can be done on public barbecues as well as some shelters. You can also cook over camp fires, and on your engine. For cheap, reliable cooking it is best to use a cassette style stove. You can buy them in camping stores for under $40. They use fuel canisters that cost about $3-4. These are stable, safe and work just like a house stove. You can heat water for bathing on them. For safety, take the fuel canister out when travelling and use them outside the vehicle. Only use them inside if well ventilated and on a stable surface.

Washing. You can easily wash yourself down using some water, soap and a couple of face washers. Wet one and use it to apply water and soap. Use the other to dry off. A towel works better. A small trigger spray bottle to spray water also helps. If you have access to public toilets but not showers you can wash over the sink, or collect warm water to wash elsewhere. If you can join a gym (can be expensive) or access a shelter you can shower there. Create a bathing kit with soap, face washers, deodorant, moist tissues/wipes, toothpaste, toothbrush to take with you.

Going to the toilet. We all need to do it. It is good to memorise the locations and opening hours of public toilets. Park within walking distance of those if you can. Males can pee in an open necked bottle, females too with practice. You can poo into plastic garbage bags with practice. Be sure to tie them up and dispose of them fast to avoid spills or smell. You can even go in the woods if you have to. If you can afford $60 though, a porta potty / camping toilet will make your life so much easier. You fill the top tank with water, it flushes like a normal toilet and you can dump the bottom tank contents down a toilet.
Living in your vehicle flyer. Tips to make it easier on the cheap.

Sleeping. If are able to stretch out flat you can sleep a lot more comfortably than in a car. Fully recline passenger seats or build a bed if you can. In a van you can sleep on a mattress on the floor. You can usually set up a simple bed using crates as the bed base, or use wood from wooden shipping pallets to build a bed base. Foam mattresses are light and easy to use, but for about $10-15 you can usually buy a single air mattress. Ask charities if they have mattress or blankets. Woollen blankets will keep you warm even when damp. Open 2 windows at least 2cms/half an inch for ventilation to avoid condensation. Fogged windows are a giveaway that someone is in the vehicle.

Keeping warm and cool. If you can, travel with the seasons, heading for cooler climates when hot and vice versa. Head to higher ground to stay cool, or down to lower areas to stay warm. Park in / out of shade to heat or cool your vehicle. Dress in layers or use blankets to keep warm. Stuff used bubble wrap inside the walls and ceiling of your van if there is no insulation there and nothing it could damage/impede). Buy Reflectix (US product) and cut it to size for your windows. When not driving put it shiny side out and paint the other side black. At night swap them around with the black side out and it looks like tinted windows. Use a fold up sunshade for the windscreen.

Storing stuff. Use what you have to store things such as suit cases, bags, plastic tubs. Sealable plastic tubs are good for storing things. Seat back organisers are useful too. The glove box is best kept for things you use a lot, like you bathing kit. In vans you can add hooks to hang things from. Use a cooler / ice box to keep food fresh. Keep the ice in a container to avoid food getting soggy or freeze a plastic water bottle instead. Even a polystyrene box wrapped in newspaper can serve as a makeshift cooler.

Communications. Get mail sent to a friend/relative or a post box if you can. A mobile phone can be easily charged in the car. Libraries often have free internet where you can sign up for free email such as gmail.com. Some internet cafes let you use and charge your laptop for the price of a coffee or snack.

Laundry. Use Laundromats, caravan parks or shelters to wash clothing if you can. Hand wash clothing in big sealable buckets. You only need cold water and a little laundry liquid. If you drive, the motion will agitate the water and help the process. Dry clothing somewhere out of view or pay to dry them at a laundry.

Where to park? Quiet locations where you will not be observed. Forest and state parks often have free camping and parking. In urban areas try, quieter streets, industrial estates at night, larger shopping centres, closed railway stations boat ramps and rest areas. Ask local churches if you can park overnight in their car park. Avoid schools, airports, hospitals or places with security patrols. Check local parking laws. Arrive after dark and remain quiet with no lights visible. If you can, leave when no one is around. Avoid parking in the same urban place too often, have several spots and swap them at random. Don’t develop a routine of being in the same spot on the same day. The key is to either not be observed or not draw attention to your vehicle if you are observed. Blend in or hide.

Try to keep your vehicle serviced, registered and insured. Breaking down will make you stand out if you stay for a while. Being stopped, fined, arrested or having your home towed will be seriously bad so keep it all legal.

Where to get help? Charities. Ask. If you don’t ask, you don’t get. Yeah you may get turned away. Just keep asking at other charities and persevere. Sign up for subsidised housing. If waiting lists are long and you have no ties, ask which towns have shorter waiting lists. Asking for food help will free up money for other things like fuel and rego.