AN INCOMPLETE GUIDE TO RIDEABLE FREIGHT CARS
The other thing to look out for on stacks, is the container size. In this picture there is space between the end of the container and the bulkhead of the car. This happens when 40ft. containers are shipped in 48ft. cars or when 48' containers are in 53' cars. Sometimes, there is no room.

When you get into a rideable well, there will be a solid bottom between the bulkhead and the container. Don't try to ride bottomless well cars. Its dumb.

Miscellaneous
Roadrailers are the name for these goofy, totally unrideable intermodal trains. They are specially designed semi trailers that hitch straight onto the axles.

With no car body, there is absolutely nowhere to ride on these things.

Norfolk Southern runs this one, the Triple Crown and I think CSX runs one with Swift trailers.

Cabooses are a thing of the past. They used to carry crew members who have been replaced by machines... sad. They still run them on military trains and some short lines. Other than that, your only chance at riding one is if its being transported for sale or something like that.

“I know I’m old enough to quit this running ‘round, I’ve tried a hundred times to stop and settle down. But every time I find a place I’d like to stay, I hear a freight train holler, and I’m on my way.”

Covered Hoppers
Covered hopper cars are commonly used for transporting grain and are consequently called “grainers”. They also carry things like soda ash, cement, salt and beans, but for some reason, nobody seems to call them “beaners”.

Rideable hopper cars are easy to spot. They have rounded sides instead of the flat, vertical, ridged, walls of their unrideable evil twins. The ends of rideable hoppers cut in at an angle and there is a platform over the wheels (unrideable hoppers have no platform). On one end the platform will be occupied by the air braking system. Since you don't want to spend a long period of time right out in the wind, find a car that has its brakes on the front end, so you can ride on the back.

There are always variations to these rules. Some round sided grainers have no platform. A couple of common variations are the Canadian Grainer and the Cadillac Grainer. A Canadian (pictured here) looks like a giant beer can set on its side and has a big hole in the end that you can climb into, curl up and fall asleep. Cadillac grainers have high sides which give you a little more privacy from the outside world.

Gondolas
Gondolas are like open topped box cars cut in half. They provide high sides for cover, but little protection from the elements. Gondolas are my favorite rides when the weather is good or the stars are out.

Only ride unloaded gondolas. Loads can and will shift in these cars add crush you!

Some gondolas have higher sides than others. Ask yourself before jumping in: will I be able to pull myself out of this?

Most gondolas have ladders on either end making them easy to get into and catch 'on the fly'.

Sometimes gondolas are used to transport coiled steel and are covered. These cars are not rideable.

Flatcars
Flat cars do not top my list of cars to look for when catching a train, though they are rideable. They provide zero protection from being seen by cops or jerks with cell phones. They also provide little protection from the elements ... you're right out there in the wind and rain. However, they work in a pinch. Flatcars with bulkheads like this are good. The bulkhead breaks the winds and will keep off a light rain.

Unloaded lumber cars with center dividers can be good as well. With bulkhead flatcars and lumber cars, ALWAYS ride at the front of the car. This way you will be out of the wind and MUCH safer if your train should
Attention Reader:
Riding freight trains can get you killed or severely injured. People who ride freight trains are engaging in a very dangerous activity. We strongly advise that you do not, after reading this guide, try to ride a train without the benefit of a veteran train rider’s experience.

People get killed every week by trains because they didn't have enough respect for these machine's powerful indifference to our well-being. People die by being run over, dragged, crushed by shifting loads, exposure, and all manner of other horrible fates. Thousands of people do successfully ride freight trains every year. Most of us are sober. Don't ride trains drunk!

The following pages are a rough guide to which kinds of freight cars are rideable which aren't. My hope in creating this guide is to give novice riders some tips as well as cautionary words about choosing what car you ride when you're catching out. This decision can make or break your ride, choose wisely. This guide cannot be complete due to the variety of manufacturers of freight rolling stock. You will probably find exceptions to the guidelines set out in the pages ahead. Our own experience, combined with the shared experience of others is the best tool we have.

Ride safe
Ride Hard

love,
Hobo-Underground publications

BOXCARS
Good rides!
Look for open doors. Boxcar doors can be really hard to open, especially older ones. If the side facing you is closed, try the other side.

Look at the springs near the axles. Are they compressed? Then the car is full. Cars that are full often have metal tags on their latches, but the presence of a latch does not necessarily mean the car is full. Pound on the side of the car with your fist. Hear a cavernous boom? The car is probably empty.

Boxcars can be difficult to get up into. The doors are higher off the ground than they look. Don't try to catch these things 'on the fly' unless you've got some experience, its tough.

Put a wedge in the door if you plan on riding. A railroad spike works well for this. Moving trains can jar boxcar doors closed, trapping you inside!

Do not hang your legs out the side while your train is moving like in the movies.
stop suddenly. Oh, and don't ride with loads ... its dumb. Ask any railroad worker about finding crushed hobos.

**Coal Cars and Oil Tankers**

Coal and oil are two commodities that get a lot of play on U.S. Railroads. Unfortunately the designers of these cars didn't seem to have us in mind. Coal cars are just open topped-hopper cars They've got flat ridged-sides and gravity chutes underneath for dumping out the coal. I have yet to see a coal car that has a ‘porch’ like some grainers do. So, if you're gonna ride, you gotta ride inside. That means one of two things. If its loaded, sitting on a pile of coal and breathing coal dust (hello black lung) or, if its unloaded scrunching yourself into a slanted walled gravity chute. Some friends of mine. ride these but I don't recommend it.

Tanker cars look like giant sausages on wheels; Many of them say: GATX, PROCOR, or CARGILL on them... These are another ride that I would advise against. First off, there's nowhere to ride. You sure can't ride on top, and the only other option is on the steel grid platform used for crossing over the car, which puts you right over the wheels with nothing to hang on to. Bad news. In addition, tank cars carry hazardous chemicals such as pesticides, and sulfuric acid, and explosives like liquefied petroleum gas. Don't ride tankers. Its dumb.

**Auto Racks**

Back in the day, automobiles were shipped on roofless cars like this one: This didn't last very long due to theft and vandalism. It used to be that auto-racks were nice rides if you could get them. For a long time the keys were shipped right along with the cars, hidden in the tailpipe or taped to the bumper. You could climb in a shinny new car and listen to the radio.

These days auto-racks look like this: and are unrideable fortresses. Sometimes when empty, they are left open, but even when they are unlocked, the huge end doors are very difficult to move on your own. Apparently they still run the roofless auto-racks in canada (the top photo was taken in 2000), but its rare to see them in the states. If you can figure a reliable way times when empty, they are left open, but even when they are unlocked, the huge end doors are very difficult to move on your own. Apparently they still run the roofless auto-racks in canada (the top photo was taken in 2000), but its rare to see them in the states. If you can figure a reliable way to get into auto-racks, good for you, but to me they're still unrideable cars.

**UNIT RIDES!**

Here’s one for those of us that get a kick out of being places we’re not supposed to go. If you’ve been riding trains for a while, you might have noticed that most freights have more than one locomotive. Sometimes four, six or even eight! Since the train crew only occupies the front cabin, that leaves plenty of room for us to ride on an otherwise unrideable train. Rear units always left are unlocked. Just climb up and get in as quick as you can. This stunt is better pulled at night or when your train crew isn’t looking. Getting caught in there with all that expensive equipment is a different ballpark than getting caught in an empty boxcar. Be discrete. If you’re getting on while the train is stopped, hide in the bathroom until the train gets moving and out of the yard. And for pete’s sake, don't touch any of the equipment!!

Unit rides are a little risky, but they’re fun and can get you in out of the cold or the rain. Locomotives also usually have bottled water in the cooler, and a nice chemical toilet to use.

**Intermodals**

Intermodals or Hotshots, or Expedited freight are your high priority trains. Intermodal shipping is terminology used to describe freight systems that use more than one method of transport. Eg. containers, which are stacked onto large oceangoing vessels, removed at ports and stacked onto freight trains and then loaded onto truck trailer beds to reach their final destination.

Intermodal or IM freight is made up of one of or a mix of three basic kinds of cars: COFC’s TOFC’s and Double Stacks.

Not much to them. COFC’s don’t provide much of a place to ride.

**PIGGYBACKS**

Piggybacks or TOFC’s (Trailer on Flat Car) are one very common intermodal car. Semitrailers are lifted onto flat cars or more function specific ‘spine cars’ and fastened down at one end. Because they are so easy to load and unload, pigs make up the highest priority trains on the railroad. In most cases piggybacks are rideable, but there are certain things to look out for.

Always look for flatcars instead of spine cars, as there is more room to ride. Also, try to get cars that are coupled together rather than ‘articulated cars’. This term is used to describe railcars that share a common axle set. You can tell that your car is articulated if there is no coupler and there are only 2 axles between the cars instead of 4. The reason you want to avoid these (although if you can catch them .... by all means do), is that they tend to have fewer ladders to assist you.

If you’re going to ride Piggybacks, bring warm clothing. You’ll be right out in the wind for the whole ride and there’s not a whole lot of cover from rail-cops either. Stay crouched under those trailer axles when you’re rolling thru the yard.

**Double Stacks**

Double stacks are many modern hobo’s preferred method of travel. These cars make up a good portion of Hotshots and certain designs provide shelter from detection and from the wind.

A double stack is a specialized well car which is designed to carry two intermodal shipping containers, stacked one on top of another. However, this car is not rideable. You can tell by looking at the bottom corners of the car. See how they’re curved rather than square? Rideable cars have square corners.