

1 With almost 5000 stores blanketing the United States, millions pass through Walmart's doors every day.  
2 But, for some Americans, it isn't just a superstore, it's a place to call home.

3 "Morning, Joe."  
4 Morning, guys.  
5 How are ya?  
6 OK, how are you?  
7 In Flagstaff Arizona, Joe Thorpy is waking up at Walmart.  
8 Can we go and get a coffee?  
9 Yeah, sure  
10 Let's do it.  
11 I'm game.  
12 Joe is homeless and has lived in the Walmart carpark for the past 7 years.  
13 Yeah, it's cheaper.  
14 Could I just get a refill?  
15 Joe, is one of tens of thousands of people taking advantage of a little publicized Walmart policy allowing  
16 travelers to pull up in their carparks and stay the night for free.  
17 You know, it can get pretty harsh up here. I've been here. I know. I've had my car. Ya know, without that,  
18 I never would have made it, you know? I'd had to be in a shelter and I don't like the shelters.  
19 Joe travelled to AZ for work, but a back injury left him jobless and on the streets. Unable to get social  
20 security, he's been forced to live out of his car.  
21 A lot of homeless people aren't bad people. You know, they could be normal people. I tell ya I was  
22 halfway normal before I started living this way.  
23 While Joe has nowhere else to go, makeshift Walmart communities like this one are attracting Americans  
24 from all walks of life.  
25 I do a mix in the mornings; my unsweetened cereal and ...  
26 In another corner of the carpark, Nolan Conway is also starting his day at Walmart.  
27 Good morning. I'm good thank you.  
28 I'm a photographer and I'm doing a little project called *Waking up at Walmart*.  
29 This professional photographer is so intrigued by the Walmart phenomenon that he's been documenting  
30 its carpark communities for the New York Times.  
31 This overnight culture here is for everyone. You know, you have people there who are there out of  
32 necessity. And you have people who are there out of convenience. Both of their stories are equally valid  
33 in this.

34 And maybe you can put one hand back?

35 Hal and Jackie are typical grey nomads staying at Walmart is engrained in the RV culture as a cheap and  
36 effective way to see the country.

37 See, we're gonna make this loop up through California and back over to the Dakotas. We like Walmart. I  
38 mean we like it a lot. It's convenient and you got everything you need inside the store. But most here,  
39 have no choice but to stay.

40 Can you put your cigarette up to your mouth?

41 Since the housing crisis began, the world's biggest company is becoming better known as a safe haven  
42 for America's homeless. Nobody knows exactly how many people are living out of their cars but with well  
43 over a million on the streets, these car parks have become de facto shelters.

44 Flagstaff is good, it's just a little cold in the winter. It gets around 20 below out here so it's a little cold.  
45 Colder than you want to be. Paul sleeps on the ground next to his friend's truck. And he's been living like  
46 this on and off for three years. Today he is earning some much-needed cash as Nolan's assistant.

47 Arizona is a right to work state. They call it a right to work for nothing state.

48 Can you survive in America on minimum wage these days?

49 No. Absolutely not.

50 Paul is not the only one stuck in a rut. A week ago, Michele and Brandon swapped their car for this old  
51 school bus. It's already broken down.

52 We just had to pull the old radiator out and drop a new one in. And hope for the best, huh?

53 Michele and Brandon have travelled from California with their daughter Enola in search of a better life.  
54 This is where my cousin sleeps. Our bedroom is in the back. So, everything is tied in with chain or a strap  
55 or bungee, so nothing shifts.

56 Where are your chickens?

57 Right here.

58 And this is Ruby.

59 That's Ruby, that's my hen.

60 Michelle and Brandon say the fled California worried that they would lose custody of their baby. Three of  
61 their children have already been taken by social services. They are so racist out there and so we call it the  
62 war on the homeless. They are so anti-homeless out there that it's a war, ok. And people like me that are  
63 sober and don't do drugs. They just want to get off the streets and have a home and do right by  
64 themselves, you know as soon as we start getting those things going for ourselves, they will do whatever  
65 they can to fuck you up.

66 For the time being, all Michelle can think about is getting her family back together. I don't know legal  
67 stuff. I don't. I am having to learn all this stuff the hard way. And so, we have just been looking for  
68 loopholes to help us get our family back together any way we can. You know, even if we have to piece it  
69 together one baby at a time, so be it. (5:53)

70 Local charity worker, Richard DuPris, has been watching the swelling numbers of Walmart's homeless.  
71 Last year he decided to help out.

72 We try to make it between five and seven hundred calories. That's enough calories to keep somebody  
73 going for a day. And an invite. Everybody is invited to our church.

74 Do you get many takers?

75 Nope, nope. Not one.

76 Every summer, homeless from elsewhere in Arizona flood into Flagstaff for the cooler weather causing  
77 the local shelters to overflow. With virtually no public housing, this car park is often their only resort.

78 I think it is a crossroads for travelers and um, and I think people come here looking for work. And they  
79 can't find it. A lot of them move on down the road but a lot of them are stuck now because they have  
80 gone through their resources. For years in Flagstaff, sleeping overnight in your vehicle was technically  
81 illegal. But recently the city's mayor has changed the law.

82 I think I would rather have them in a Walmart parking lot than out by the side of the road or off the  
83 highway somewhere, where you know they are not as well protected. And there just does not seem to  
84 be any trouble with spending the night in Walmart and I saw no reason why the city should prohibit it.

85 In this place the motor caught on fire.

86 Oh really, while they were working on it?

87 Yes, my friend went to start it and it shot out some flames about like so and they had to put it out. I was  
88 so scared, this whole place was ...

89 Lis Susa is from Washington state and a regular of the Flagstaff Walmart. Every year she drives south for  
90 the Arizona summer. I mean this is convenient for me to come up here in the summertime and have a  
91 place where I can park, where I don't have to be stuck with paying, you know, rent to somebody. Liz is an  
92 aspiring actress. From her RV she is chasing the Hollywood dream.

93 That is professionally taken. I get some of my prints sent here at Walmart because it's cheaper. I really  
94 don't have anybody that is coordinating me because everybody is ... usually what I do is I go on the  
95 internet and I have a list of casting directors and I send myself out with resumes and if I hear anything  
96 back then I hear something but uh...I've been doing this for years and I have never heard anything.

97 How's it going Joe?

98 For those down on their luck, this Walmart carpark is now a welcome refuge. But many like Joe Thorby  
99 end up trapped here.

100 Have you seen this yet?

101 Yeah, in the magazine.

102 Yeah I got the magazine actually.

103 Joe was photographed by Nolan last year. About a year ago. That's the old car. The old beater. Yeah,  
104 what was that, like a station wagon. Yeah, an 88 Ford station wagon. That car saved my tail, man, many  
105 times, you know.

106 Since his photo was taken, Joe is still on the waiting list for public housing. I ain't getting no younger out  
107 here. I came out here when I was 46 and I am 55 now and I feel it taking a toll on me, you know. I'm  
108 tired.

109 Joe is surviving on food-stamps and the questionable charity of a local casino that provides free  
110 transport, food and gambling chips to Flagstaff's down and outers.

111 Heck, they give you free food and food voucher for the buffet and everything like this and 15 dollars in  
112 free play and it didn't cost nothing and you get to play the slots or whatever and I was winning money.  
113 And it is like what the heck man, this is cool. It's not costing and I'm eating and everything. Well, I kind of  
114 got hooked after a while.

115 Joe is now addicted to gambling but it gets worse. After test driving a new vehicle for a few free  
116 gambling chips, Joe was talked into trading in his truck for a new car he can't afford.

117 So, what do your homeless friends think about the car?

118 Why am I still here? You know, it's like, they figured, yeah, he's got a new car, man, he's going to get out  
119 of here, you know. He's moving up the ladder now. And I don't know. I'm still here. It's like I don't know  
120 where else to go. I don't have no money to go, you know, anywhere else.

121 When he can scratch a few dollars for petrol, Joe escapes the Walmart crowds for a nearby forest. Like  
122 all others stuck at Walmart, he is looking for a way to turn his life around.

123 This is something like from being in the forest, you know, and seeing them like this, I just drew it like that  
124 way. It's a buck. But, I could get better, you know, I am like an amateur but with paint and uh, I could, uh,  
125 I could, I might be able to do better, you know. Get where I could sell them.

126 With his new car and a place to park it, for the moment, Joe is ok. But time is running out. The casino  
127 wants its money and he is likely to lose the car in weeks.

128 I used to have a life and I think that is what makes it hard for me because sometimes I feel guilty because  
129 of it, you know, being in this situation. But, I'm not alone, you know. Anybody can go homeless.  
130 Everybody is one step away from that actually.

131 With his luck running out, Joe faces an uncertain future. But for tonight, like for the thousands of other  
132 Americans, Walmart is his home.