



## Are buses the new way to go?

By Bill McGee, special for USA TODAY, April 30, 2009

It's a proven fact that when airfares are cheap enough, more people travel. So could the same principle apply when bus fares fall as low as \$1?

Sixteen years ago the term "Southwest Effect" entered the lexicon, after a study by the U.S. Department of Transportation confirmed that when Southwest or a similar low-fare carrier launches a new route, it not only steals away existing traffic, but passengers who otherwise might not have flown are induced to fly.

Now the question is whether the many no-frills, low-cost bus lines that are buzzing along highways in every region of the United States are causing more Americans to consider intercity travel.

### Expanding beyond Chinatown

In recent years, dozens of cities throughout the country have seen an influx of what are generally called Chinatown bus lines or dragon buses. They operate under names such as Fung Wah, as well as Double Happiness/AA Bus, Lucky River, Lucky Star, USAsia, and many others. For some riders, such companies may have seemed to spring up overnight, since they're now ubiquitous in cities ranging from Boston to New York, Chicago to Detroit, and Las Vegas to Los Angeles.

With little money spent on advertising or marketing, the dragon bus lines grew through word-of-mouth recommendations, particularly within ethnic communities. But they've quickly expanded, particularly in the busy Northeast corridor. At first the large network bus lines may have wanted to ignore the upstarts, but after a while that probably didn't seem like a feasible strategy. Consequently three motorcoach heavyweights entered the low-fare fray.

One was the Stagecoach Group, the British transportation conglomerate, which launched Megabus ([megabus.com/us](http://megabus.com/us)) in the U.S. in 2006; currently the domestic brand operates from 30 cities in North America. Then last year Greyhound and Peter Pan teamed to introduce BoltBus ([boltbus.com](http://boltbus.com)), which currently serves five destinations between Boston and Washington, D.C., and offers Wi-Fi access, power plug-ins, and even a frequent rider program. If this proposition sounds familiar, think Continental Lite or Ted, only with diesel fumes.

So what effect are all these low-fare bus lines having on the industry? According to the latest Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) data, more Americans are traveling more miles by bus, and those numbers have been steadily increasing in recent years. And several months ago, the Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development at DePaul University in Chicago released a policy study that found scheduled bus service—which had been declining for more than four decades—had fallen by 10.2% between 2002 and 2006. However, it then rose by 8.1% in 2007 and again by 9.8% in 2008. Evidence suggests such growth is continuing.

All this indicates that Megabus seems to be the Southwest of bus lines. The Chaddick study concluded: "The renaissance of intercity bus service dates to May 1, 2006, when Megabus introduced service." In fact, that bus line's traffic grew by 97% between 2007 and 2008, and this January, Megabus boarded its 2 millionth customer. As for BoltBus, the study notes that it has not released traffic statistics but has reported profitability and steady growth.

Unfortunately, BTS has not posted new estimates on average passenger fares since 2002, so it's hard to confirm exactly what's happened with ticket prices. But it's clear that on key routes many Americans are paying the lowest rates in decades for intercity bus travel.

### **Evaluating the good ...**

From a consumer perspective, however, low-fare bus lines offer both pluses and minuses. There's no mystery about what's attracted many riders to these budget bus lines: It's those rates that in some cases can seem ridiculously low. Because you won't find just backpackers and cash-strapped spring breakers when prices are \$20-\$30 for service between New York and Boston. In fact, single-digit fares are not uncommon on some routes.

The bargains even extend to those traveling at the last minute. Earlier this week I searched for fares from Philadelphia to New York via BoltBus and found one-way rates of \$10-\$15—for same-day travel. Then I searched for one-way fares from St. Louis to Chicago via Megabus and found a seat for \$21, also departing the same day.

What's more, BoltBus and Megabus both offer a limited number of \$1 fares on each departure (hence the "BOLT FOR A BUCK" ads on those big orange-and-black buses). As with airlines, buying in advance will secure lower rates in many cases, but some low-fare bus companies also offer walk-up fares—literally, as in walking up to the bus door. However, not all of these bus lines allow last-minute ticketing, so inquire in advance.

There's also something to be said for the convenience factor. For many travelers, departing and arriving from downtown locations can shave hours off trips to and from the airport. And that doesn't count the time saved by avoiding the airport security hassles.

### **... and evaluating the worrisome**

Depending on your point of view, there could be a catch or two to all these travel bargains. Because such low fares come with quite a few caveats. Consider the following:

- Don't call us

Of course, these days there's nothing unusual about booking travel online. But for some consumers, the idea of booking travel with a company that does not provide a toll-free line or maintain any public telephone contact numbers may be a little disconcerting. With BoltBus and some other bus operators, e-mail is the only means of communication.

- Use it or lose it

With many low-fare bus lines, you have virtually no flexibility when it comes to re-booking or canceling your trip. For example, the BoltBus FAQ offers the following:

*\* Can I change my ticket?*

*"Tickets are non-refundable and only good for travel on the schedule & date that you have purchased."*

*\* What happens if I miss my schedule?*

*"Tickets are non-refundable and only good for travel on the schedule & date that you have purchased."*

Megabus does allow some changes for minimal fees. However, with BoltBus, Megabus and other lines, you may lose your seat if you fail to arrive more than five minutes prior to departure (a minimum of 15 minutes is recommended).

- Braving the elements

Many of these new-entrant bus lines operate from street corners, not bus terminals. So that means you need to be prepared to stand outside, regardless of heat, cold, rain, snow, etc.

- Reliability records

A quick online search will reveal multiple blogs filled with horror stories from passengers who waited for delayed or canceled service. In addition, many of these lines don't employ ground personnel in the cities they serve, so there's no one to consult if you're stranded on a street corner with no bus in sight.

- And access for all?

Yet another consideration when dealing with some low-fare bus lines is compliance with federal regulations, such as access for the handicapped. In 2004, a blind couple was denied boarding on a Fung Wah bus in Boston; three years later, the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination ruled in favor of the Commonwealth's attorney general in a lawsuit filed on behalf of the couple. The bus line was ordered to implement "comprehensive anti-discrimination and service animal policies."

### **The safety issue**

For some would-be passengers, low-fare bus service equates to taking an unnecessary risk. A little research may confirm or dispel such fears.

**In the big picture, traveling by motorcoach is an extremely safe mode of transportation. Thus the American Bus Association claims, "Buses are the safest vehicle[s] on the road, bar none." In 2007, fatalities on all types of buses represented just 0.09% of all transportation deaths, in the same range as rail travel (0.01%) but considerably less than fatalities in passenger cars (38.39%).** Obviously, however, more people travel in cars so a more accurate apples-to-apples comparison is to examine such deaths on a vehicle-mile basis. Those data show the death rate was exactly twice as high for cars compared to all types of buses in 2007; however, the number of buses involved in accidents has been steadily rising in recent years.

Many passengers, though, may have become soured on low-fare bus lines because of several well-publicized incidents and accidents in recent years, including one involving a Megabus driver's arrest for DUI in Michigan in 2008. Back in 2005, one of Fung Wah's buses caught fire in Connecticut and in 2006 another Fung Wah coach overturned in Massachusetts; subsequently the Massachusetts Department of Telecommunications and Energy increased its inspections of coaches operated by that bus line. Currently that department provides an online tool for consumers to look up complaints lodged against bus lines operating within the state; it's available at [db.state.ma.us/dpu/qorders/frmTransportation.asp](http://db.state.ma.us/dpu/qorders/frmTransportation.asp).

Also in 2006, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) announced more than \$44,000 in fines against Fung Wah for violating safety regulations. Those fines were levied at a time when Fung Wah had received poor ratings for driver safety and safety management from the federal agency. On its website, the FMCSA provides a Passenger Carrier Safety database

([ai.fmcsa.dot.gov/Passenger/home.asp](http://ai.fmcsa.dot.gov/Passenger/home.asp)) that allows you to search for bus lines by company name and/or geographical region, and then evaluate their current safety records. For example, Fung Wah, Lucky River, Lucky Star, and USAsia currently are listed as "satisfactory" but Megabus' Chicago operation is listed as "conditional" (its East Coast operation is not rated). If you're uncertain about traveling on any bus line, you should visit this site before booking.

**For further assistance on safety issues, the American Bus Association offers key links on its site at [buses.org/safeandreliable](http://buses.org/safeandreliable).** And if you need help researching the safety records of charter bus lines, the United Motorcoach Association offers such assistance on its site at [uma.org/help/ratings.asp](http://uma.org/help/ratings.asp).

### **Learning more**

In addition to the safety resources cited above, you may want to use a search engine to query online comments posted by passengers of a given bus line. And here are two other sites to consider: Chinatown Bus ([chinatownbus.org](http://chinatownbus.org)) can help you comparison shop among certain low-fare lines, while GotoBus ([gotobus.com](http://gotobus.com)) is an online travel agency that offers packages nationwide.

There's one more consideration for those who may not have considered bus travel a viable option: the state of the planet. When I researched carbon calculators for *Consumer Reports* last year, we found that buses were the most eco-friendly mode of transportation on certain routes. **And there's no contest if you're comparing the carbon footprints of buses to cars. In fact, a recent study from the American Bus Association found motor coaches provide 206.6 passenger miles per gallon of fuel, compared to 92.4 for commuter rail and just 27.2 for single passenger cars.**

The Chaddick Institute estimates these new low-fare bus lines are reducing carbon dioxide emissions by an estimated 36,000 tons a year. Who knew bus fumes were so good for the environment?

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