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Back on the Bus

We Got on Board, Too, To See What's Driving the Boom



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There is a new generation of bus riders traveling between Washington and New York, and these are some of their faces: an FBI lawyer, a Northwestern University undergraduate, a Brooklyn uncle, a government consultant, a preschool teacher from California and a London lad working at a summer camp in New Jersey. You can also see my visage pressed against the large tinted window, and I'm sure I've seen yours, too. We are a tribe, and we're growing.

The bus is making a comeback. That once maligned mode of transportation -- search terms: Greyhound, runaways; Chinatown, fire -- is becoming the au courant form of travel along the Northeast corridor. All the early adopters are taking it. But so, too, are people on budgets, Washingtonians who loathe the 233-mile drive to the Big Apple and bons vivants with an itch to head for New York at midnight to catch the after-hours parties.

The appeal is prodigious. The buses are cheap, convenient, well kitted-out and eco-approved. They are relatively hassle-free, especially because someone else is stuck navigating traffic.

Baggage rules are more lax than on other forms of transportation, and there are no sneaky taxes or rules against carrying liquids, unless they have alcohol content. In addition, your pals, relatives and co-workers are hopping aboard. Do you really want to be left at the curb?

"I take it all the time. All my friends do, too," said Alan Henderson, a Howard University student who was waiting in line recently to board a Megabus in New York.

Between 2005 and 2007, according to the American Bus Association, nationwide ridership surged by 20 percent, increasing from 631 million passenger trips to 751 million. "We move about the same numbers as domestic [air] carriers each year," said ABA spokesman Eron Shosteck, a bus rider himself, "and more people in two weeks than Amtrak does all year."

As Shosteck put it, "This is Transportation 2.0."

On a more local level, new bus lines are popping up like wildflowers on a median strip: DC2NY (inaugurated July 2007), BoltBus and Megabus (spring 2008), Tripper Bus (February), Hola (July). The motor coaches form a dotted line from Dupont Circle to 15th and K streets, over to the parking lot at H and Ninth streets, and south to Sixth and I streets in Chinatown. You can also trace the perimeter of Penn Station in New York and run out of fingers and toes counting the buses.

Despite outward appearances -- it's a bus, after all, with doors, windows, wheels, etc. -- no two are identical. They vary in amenities, service and style, pickup/drop-off locations and sometimes cost. Even on short-haul journeys, those distinctions matter.

To shake out the good from the bad, the comfortable from the dismal, I dedicated a month of my life to riding the buses to New York, boarding nearly a dozen to figure out what makes these vehicles go 'round and 'round -- or flat.

It was hard to nail down an exact count of bus lines. I initially found 10, but then an 11th (Hola) popped up, and then a 12th (MVP). Part of the confusion stems from the fact that some of the major lines oversee several brands (Greyhound co-owns Bolt with Peter Pan, for instance, and Megabus is a subsidiary of Coach USA); forge partnerships (Greyhound and Peter Pan); or go by multiple aliases (Chinatown buses). It was so easy back in my grandmother's day: skinny racing dog, infantile boy who can fly or Trailways.

Of the riders I met during my busathon -- and they were of all ages, professions and financial standings -- many said that the main factors they weighed in deciding which bus to take were price, location and times.

"I had five choices just for today," said Jonathan Kaspari, a 24-year-old transplant from Minneapolis who works at a Washington consulting firm. "For price and schedule, this was the right bus for me." That bus was Washington Deluxe. Cost: \$21 one way. Pickup in Dupont Circle and on 15th Street NW at the corner of K Street.

"When I went on the Internet, there were a ton of Chinatown buses," Julie Fishman, a 30-year-old West Coast teacher visiting East Coast friends and family, told me as we cruised along one Monday afternoon in a half-empty Hola bus. "I don't have a car, so location mattered most." Hola departs from Sixth and I streets in Chinatown and is one of the few buses to drop off near the Port Authority Bus Terminal in New York.

In the other camp are travelers who profess an unshakable loyalty to a bus line and can't be tempted away, even by the \$1 fares some lines offer, depending on availability. (If they do stray, they always come back.) "This is the bus company I started taking in 2007, and I have stuck with them ever since," said Chris Comis, a D.C. resident who works in the restaurant industry and rode DC2NY round-trip for a sandal-fitting on the Lower East Side. "I tried Bolt just to see what the other buses were like. See where I am now?"

And on the extreme edges are the in-the-field busologists who could write a thesis on the subject. Take Gabe Brotman, a Northwestern University student who was sitting on the top level of a double-decker Megabus one recent Sunday evening, returning to Washington after a wedding. He was sampling Megabus for the first time, because he "wanted to try something new from Bolt."

He offered a running analysis of the motorized workhorse: "Megabus is about how many people you can pack on a bus. Most people can't even stand up straight. It's like riding a tour bus for five hours. With Chinatown, you hear all of these horror stories of being stuck on the side of the road and of the smell and inconvenience. And Greyhound doesn't guarantee you a seat. Bolt is more reasonable. You're on one level and you're not waiting with 300 people to get on the bus. You're not stressed out." After this Megabus experience, he will be returning to Bolt, his line of choice. Experiment over.

Megabus, Bolt and the other recent entrants occupy the later chapters in the history of buses. Greyhound, founded 95 years ago, is in the front of the book, with the Chinatown buses filling in the middle. The pioneer of intercity express service was Fung Wah Bus, which in the late 1990s started transporting immigrant workers and pauper students between Chinatowns in Boston and New York. The concept soon expanded to Washington.

Some of the so-called dragon buses have had sketchy safety records that have led to some dramatic rides. The tales are legion. "A cop pulled us over the day before Christmas for not having a permit," Giulietta Pinna, a student at the Fashion Institute of Technology, told me about her Chinatown bus nightmare from a few years ago. "He threatened to throw us off. It was traumatizing." After that fright, Pinna switched to the train, but the cost was prohibitive. She is now riding Megabus.

In 2005, a fire on a Fung Wah bus drew the criticism of Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), who proposed tighter safety regulations and spot checks. Oh, how I wish the senator had been on my Chinatown bus, New Century Travel, as we made our way to New York on a warm summer's eve not too long ago. I needed a lawmaker on my side.

The vehicle itself was in fine shape. The driver ran down the aisle collecting trash from the last trip, then hung new plastic bags on the armrests. Unfortunately, he did not check the restroom, which was sprayed with graffiti and lacked toilet paper and hand sanitizer.

I could manage without those conveniences (note: Always pack like a mother with small, messy children.), but what irked me most was the bad behavior in the front of the bus. The driver, for one, repeatedly chatted on his cellphone and checked his messages, taking his eyes off the road. He was not wearing a seat belt, and because of the loose springs in his seat, he bounced around as if he were on a trampoline. For dinner, he pulled out a giant melon that required peeling. His technique was to bite, chew off the meat and toss the rind into a nearby sack that had taken him minutes of intense labor to set up. His tosses were not all slam dunks.

Without warning, we took a detour to a dirt hill near a travel plaza in Baltimore. Parked behind a Double Happiness bus, I felt twice the sadness. We picked up a few people, then drove on, only to stop again in Delaware for a smoke/bathroom/fried chicken break. After 11 p.m., we arrived at our Philadelphia stop and sat there. A passenger's earlier remark returned to me: "You will never understand New Century Travel. Don't even try." Eventually, a girl with pigtails instructed us to board the bus parked ahead of us. We packed up in the dark, settled in, started rolling, then stopped again. Someone had forgotten his cellphone on the first bus.

As if the driver's chatting weren't disconcerting enough, the passenger across from me had a special talent for mimicry. He sang along with a woman's cellphone ring every time it blasted. When I awoke from my daze, set to the soundtrack of Verizon, I looked up to see Chinese characters on a sign. I was overjoyed, until I read the rest of the lettering: Brooklyn. Two men jumped out, but no one else was allowed to exit.

We were set free in Manhattan after 1 a.m., more than five hours after leaving Washington. As I plotted my course to the subway, I watched the driver collect the trash from the bus and toss it out the door, onto the street. I stared at him in disbelief; he shrugged and drove off. I picked up the detritus and tossed it in the can. That garbage was an apt metaphor for my Chinatown bus experience, and I put it where it belonged.

That was the worst of my rides. From there, things only got better, minus some bungles: On my first attempt to ride Greyhound, I ignored the company's suggestion to arrive an hour before departure. (It's first come, first served, first go.) When I showed up 30 minutes in advance, the bus had already filled up and taken off. I was stuck with Peter Pan and the gnawing knowledge that I could have been traveling on one of the dog's sleek new vehicles, which come with leather seats, WiFi, outlets, cup holders and much-appreciated seat belts.

On Vamoose, one of the more veteran players (established in 2004), I sat among three Hasidic brothers who passed food and Hebrew texts to one another. Because I was in between them, we ended up chatting about religion, science and literature. The engaging conversation lasted from the New Jersey Turnpike to Bethesda, our end point. A few days later, racing to catch Tripper Bus in the afternoon heat of New York, I did not have a chance to stock up on water. At the pickup spot near Penn Station, I was greeted by a giant cooler of cold bottled water, free to all passengers. Once aboard, I noticed no toilet paper. I e-mailed customer service and received a

reply: "Sorry to hear that. If you let the driver know, he will be more than happy to give you a roll of toilet paper." The bus driver graciously pointed out a whole supply near the lavatory.

The little perks mattered immensely and were a sweet tonic on what could otherwise be a mind-numbing journey. (With heavy traffic, the trip can last up to six hours.) But the more I rode, the more I understood the wider picture of bus travel. Overall, the industry has shaken its sordid reputation, emerging as a shiny chariot with a solid track record. The bus resurgence has been "a remarkable recovery of an industry," said Joe Schwieterman, a professor of public service and director of DePaul University's Chaddock Institute for Metropolitan Development. "Intercity bus travel is back and is now part of mainstream travel."

According to a study by Schwieterman, in 2007-08 the economic downturn, the spike in gas prices and airline cutbacks led the intercity bus industry to post "its biggest one-year gain in service in a half-century."

Credit goes mainly to the new convoy of buses, which appropriated the Chinatown model, then gave it a substantial upgrade. This new species offers curbside pickup and drop-offs, cheap fares, clean restrooms, express service, online reservations, free WiFi and loyalty programs. Neither Amtrak, currently exploring WiFi service on trains, nor my car can make such declarations.

The bus fares undercut Amtrak and, depending on the number of passengers, personal vehicles. One-way fares on the train start at \$49, compared with \$1 to \$30 on the bus. As for my car, Townsend determined that gas for my make and model would add up to \$43.78, plus about \$20 for tolls. The buses also earn hugs from carbon-emission watchers. According to such experts as Schwieterman and the ABA, one bus can potentially eliminate 55 cars from the road. The Union of Concerned Scientists' "Getting There Greener" guide notes that a couple can halve their carbon output by taking the bus and leaving their hybrid car in the garage.

All said, having covered more than 2,000 miles on the bus and dedicated 55-odd hours to life on the highway, I feel a kinship with the bus and its riders. It delivered what it promised: me to New York. What's less certain is: Which bus will I book next time I travel to Manhattan? I have my pet lines, but in the end, it really depends on price, time and location. I do, however, know what I won't be taking: the train or my car . . . or New Century.

Before You Climb Aboard . . .

Riding the bus between Washington and New York is more than just getting on and off. Here are tips to help make the journey an enjoyable one.

-- Try to book as far out as possible to snag the cheapest fare, especially on lines that offer prices starting at \$1 (e.g., Tripper Bus, BoltBus and Megabus). For a comprehensive Web search, check out BusJunction.com (<http://www.busjunction.com>), an aggregator that shows available buses and compares prices for a specific date. Also include in your search ticket brokers, such as Gotobus.com (<http://www.gotobus.com>).

-- Not all buses are safe and legal. For information on choosing a bus, peruse the Web site of the American Bus Association (<http://www.buses.org>), which features a Consumer Corner section with suggestions. You can also scan its list of members, which must meet certain safety standards to be accepted into the organization. The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration also has a useful Web site (<http://www.fmcsa.dot.gov>).

-- For online orders, know the boarding-pass policy before departing for the bus. Some require a printout, while others will accept the reservation number on a scrap of paper or flashed on a gadget screen.

-- Passengers with reservations must arrive anywhere from an hour (Greyhound) to 15 minutes (Bolt, Washington Deluxe, etc.) before departure time. If you show up after that, you may lose your seat.

-- Bring toilet paper and hand sanitizer, just in case. Also, only Tripper Bus and DC2NY provide water, so stock up on liquids.

-- Not all the buses have outlets, so charge your electronics before you board.

-- On Megabus, try to score a seat in the front row of the top level. It has the most legroom and the widest window space. Plus, it feels as though you are on a carnival ride.

-- Some companies feature customer service centers that address your needs quickly -- even en route. If you have any concerns during the ride, e-mail the company.

You can't judge a bus by its exterior. Though they share the same route (Washington to New York) and mode of transportation (motor coach), the bus companies are vastly different. We should know: We hopped 10 coaches from 10 different lines, noting such details as pickup and drop-off locations, amenities and prices. We then combined the data with our experiences to formulate a bottom line and a ranking from one bus (skip it) to four buses (tops).

CARRIER

AMENITIES

BOTTOM LINE

Bolt Bus

877-265-8287

boltbus.com



Free WiFi, outlets and extra legroom. Some of the buses have leather seats and seat belts. With Bolt Rewards, receive a free one-way trip for every eight one-ways.

The Greyhound-owned line is a **crowd favorite** because of the amenities, guaranteed seating and **easy boarding process**. (You can flash your reservation on your tech gadget.) One downside: The buses are frequently sold out at the last minute and during popular times.

DC2NY

202-332-2691

dc2ny.com



Free WiFi, outlets and bottled water; movies and scheduled rest stops added on the basis of passenger votes. Rewards program offers lower fares, a more generous rescheduling policy and a free trip after eight rides.

Staff is very affable and sensitive to passengers' needs, such as **voting for onboard entertainment.** (My crew voted no for "The Office," "The Interpreter" or "Get Smart.") Very clean buses, and we drank up that free water. Our only wish is for later departure times: On many days, the last bus leaves the District at 5:30 p.m.

Greyhound

800-231-2222

greyhound.com



New buses have free WiFi, outlets, extra legroom, seat belts and cup holders. Road Rewards program offers perks.

We relished the new buses, which reminded us of a **swank VIP lounge,** but disliked having to be at the terminal an hour in advance to grab a seat. We also cringed at the craziness of the terminal.

Hola

202-509-9600

holabus.com



Free WiFi and satellite TV allegedly.

We were smitten with the logo (a grinning pandalike bear with a halo) but lukewarm about the actual bus. The driver did not know how to operate the WiFi, the trash bags needed to be emptied and an image on the TV just flickered. At least the vehicle had a **new-bus smell**

MegaBus

877-462-6342

megabus.com/us



Free WiFi, **double-decker fleet;** power outlets being added. Promos offered to Facebook and Twitter followers.

Megabus, a subsidiary of Coach USA, is a mega workhorse, offering **more than 20 round trips a day.** When Bolt is booked up, many people default to Megabus.

Tripper Bus

877-826-3874

tripperbus.com



Free WiFi and bottled water; outlets. With the frequentrider program, travel four times and get **one trip free.**

Suckers for **free cold water** on a hot day and topnotch customer service, we easily fell for Tripper. Before leaving New York, owner Betty Unger boarded the bus to make sure we were all happy and hydrated. Halfway through the trip, we **e-mailed HQ** to alert them to the toilet paper situation (none). The company messaged back an answer, and the bus driver later showed us the TP stash. Our only wish is for more frequent service.

Vamoose

877-393-2828

vamoosebus.com



With frequent-rider program, travel four times and receive a free trip. Company is also launching Vamoose Gold **for about \$50 one way.**

The company wins points for **personable customer service** and clean vehicles, but its buses aren't very 21st century. The **fare is also the highest** of the lot.

Washington

Deluxe

866-287-6932

washny.com



Free WiFi on select vehicles. Collect four roundtrip coupons and receive a fifth ride for free.

Convenient pickups in Washington and helpful customer service. The buses don't depart as late as some of the other companies (last one is 7:30 p.m.), but we'd happily **get on the road earlier** for this ride.

Buses come with air conditioning and restrooms, but sometimes the companies charter vehicles, so you might not get all the other promised fixings. No trip is ever the same, due to the quixotic nature of traffic and passengers.

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