

# The Washington Post

## Captains of the Interstates

### Tour Bus Drivers Roll With the Rules, However Demanding



Driver Melvin W. Wilson tidies up his bus while his passengers, bilingual eighth-graders from the American School Foundation in Mexico, explore the Tidal Basin and its canopy of cherry blossoms. (Photos By Lois Raimondo -- The Washington Post)

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Sometimes at night, when all the passengers are asleep and Melvin W. Wilson is out on the interstate and the wind gets under his 50,000-pound VanHool tour bus, the coach seems to float up and down like a ship at sea, outlined in running lights of amber and red.

But not this morning.

On this day, Wilson, 63, of [Alexandria](#), is at the helm of his regular No. 6 bus, the first in a three-bus caravan bearing 136 schoolchildren from [Mexico](#), 12 chaperons and an array of expectations and deadlines, into the tourist maelstrom of downtown Washington.

Rain streaks the windshield. Traffic on Interstate 295 is heavy. Signs reading "No Buses" leap from nowhere. There is construction. Cops. Potholes. Steel plates. "No left Turn" and "Work Zone" placards. Jersey barriers. Orange highway cones.

And Mr. Wilson -- the name is stitched in turquoise on his black vest -- has been up since 4:30 a.m.

One long workday earlier this week, as the Cherry Blossom Festival kicked off Washington's spring-summer tourist season, Wilson allowed visitors to observe 12 hours in the life of a tour bus driver.

**The American Bus Association says private tour bus drivers often bring 55,000 tourists a day into the city, but are subject to increasingly onerous parking, driving, idling and security regulations.**

As Wilson said this week: "The city wants the tourists. We love to bring the tourists. They need to cut [us] some slack."

Wilson's tour day began at 8:30 a.m. when he and fellow drivers Harold McCarty and Willie Gallman maneuvered their 45-foot-long, eight-wheel New World Tours buses into a parking lot at the [Comfort Inn](#) Capital Gateway in Landover Hills.

Wilson already had driven 40 miles from his home to the bus company's yard in Bristow, Va., and then 50 miles to the motel. He had a banana and a cup of coffee with him, and, in his briefcase, a hand-held computer device he used to study the Bible during breaks. He was wearing black shoes, black pants, a black vest and a long-sleeved white shirt with a slightly worn collar.

A good driver's collar should show signs of wear, he said, from being alert and looking around. "You can tell if they're doing their job or not," he said. "Just walk up to them and look at their shirt collar."

So diligent is Wilson that he checks the bus's huge side-view mirrors even when it is parked.

The caravan set out with Wilson in Bus A, followed by McCarty in Bus B and Gallman in Bus C. There was chatter on a walkie-talkie as Wilson and Gallman plotted the best route into and around town. McCarty, as the middle man, stayed mostly quiet.

Wilson's 50 students, bilingual eighth-graders from the American School Foundation in [Monterrey](#), talked excitedly and occasionally broke into a few lines of the 1960s hit, "Hey! Baby."

The buses maneuvered out onto I-295 south, got off at East Capitol street, wanted to turn onto C street, but were rebuffed by a "No Buses" sign, and wound up at the congested intersection of H Street and Maryland Avenue NE.

Near the Capitol, where tour buses are forbidden except for an area near the Capitol Reflecting Pool, the group was greeted on Constitution Avenue by a large sign reading "All trucks . . . and buses turn here."

The reflecting pool drop-off area, from where tourists walk up a steep hill to the Capitol, is also where the [D.C. Department of Transportation](#) likes to make surprise bus inspections, Wilson said. Then there are the \$500 parking tickets and the potential for fines of \$1,000 for violating the District's three-minute limit on engine idling, Wilson and other drivers said.

Later there were stops at the Tidal Basin to see the cherry blossoms and [Arlington National Cemetery](#), where the buses waited in a parking lot while the students took a tour.

At the [Mall](#), Wilson's lunch was a hot dog from a vendor. He stole a few minutes to read Scripture. Dinner was eaten from a plastic-foam box that was propped on the steering wheel.

All the while, he was the picture of serenity. "You can't get excited," he said. "You have people's lives in your hands." Drivers must also be flexible, he said, and leave themselves a way out on the road.

At one point, as he was making a sharp turn, trying to avoid a parked motor scooter, a group of adults and children ran across the street in front of the bus. Wilson had already seen them and slowed. "I knew those people were going to run across the street," he said.

Wilson said the job requires utter concentration. And he tries to leave his worries at the bus yard in the morning.

Well after dark, his bus sighed with the escape of compressed air as he shut down the big Caterpillar engine at the motel parking lot. Even then, his day was not done. He had to search for a nearby motel room so he could be back on duty by 8 a.m. the next day.



Wilson says his job allows him to meet many people, including passersby, while he waits for his passengers to return from a sightseeing stop. (Lois Raimondo - The Washington Post)