

Talking Transportation: Bus Wars

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By Jim Cameron

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You see them every day zooming along I-95. Buses, crammed with folks heading from New York City to Boston and back. They carry exotic names like Fung Wah and BoltBus. And they're the hottest thing in interstate transportation these days because they're also the cheapest.

(Full disclosure: you couldn't pay me enough money to take a bus for more than 10 minutes. Buses make Southwest Airlines look commodious.)

The New York-to-Boston corridor is one of the most heavily traveled in the nation. The air shuttles alone carry 700,000+ passengers a year at a one-way fare of \$300 (first class seats coming in December will be \$100 - \$250 additional) for the seldom on-time half-hour flight.

Amtrak carried 613,000 passengers between the Big Apple and Beantown in 2007, up from 460,800 a year earlier. Mind you, their journey runs four hours and 15 minutes (three and a half hours on Acela) and costs \$89 one way (\$105 on Acela). But hey, it's a train--immune to the weather and traffic.

If you look at the 220-mile trip by car, assuming 28 miles to a \$3.70 gallon of gas, the trip would cost you about \$30 one-way, not including tolls and stress. Assuming two passengers, that's almost 16 passenger-miles per gallon.

Compare that to 39 passenger-miles per gallon by train, 42 passenger-miles per gallon by air or 184 passenger-miles per gallon on the bus (according to the American Bus Association). Which do you think is the "greenest"?

There's no doubt which is the cheapest. Fung Wah (Chinese for "magnificent wind") charges just \$15 one way between New York and Boston. The Lucky Star bus can be as little as \$12 (all fares quoted based on a Friday – Sunday roundtrip booked online two weeks in advance). And departures are every hour. Of course, you do leave from Chinatown.

In fact, there are now more interstate bus passengers to and from Chinatown each day than the Port Authority Bus Terminal, a fact which has captured the attention of New York City lawmakers and police.

What you get for your low fare is a seat, first-come first-served. And one comfort stop enroute (in Lucky Star's case, the Burger King in Vernon, Conn.) where you can also board or leave the bus).

All of these buses allow passengers to bring at least one suitcase and a carry-on for free, compared to the airlines which will whack you \$15 - \$25 for checked luggage.

The Bolt Bus, a division of Greyhound, leaves from 34th Street and Eighth Avenue and charges \$17.50 - \$23 but also offers free wireless Internet en route so you can text your friends about how slow the traffic is crawling through Norwalk.

Peter Pan is \$15 one way. But for an extra \$5 you can board first and grab your favorite seat.

Megabus, a subsidiary of Coach USA, charges as little as \$10 one way on some runs and also offers WiFi and free movies. Also in the running, Sunshine (\$15) and Boston Deluxe (\$15) which also stops in Hartford.

On the upscale end of bus service is LimoLiner (\$89 one way) which runs between New York and Boston Hiltons. This bus offers two and one seating, more legroom between comfy leather chairs, free WiFi, a cell-phone free "quiet zone" and an on-board stewardess.

The Fung Wah line is the oldest, running since 1998, but also the riskiest. Its buses have been involved in numerous accidents and its drivers are ranked in the worst 2 percent nationally by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration. But hey, what do you expect for \$15?

With the exception of Lucky Star and Boston Deluxe, none of these buses serves Connecticut riders. We're in the equivalent of "fly-over country" for these new services compared to Amtrak which stops in Stamford, Bridgeport, New Haven, Old Saybrook, New London and Mystic.

But if the bus wars continue, there's no reason to think we in the Nutmeg State won't eventually be offered such service. Meantime, when you see the next Fung Wah or BoltBus come flying along, give a wave to your future.



(Editor's Note: Jim Cameron has been a commuter out of Darien for 17 years. He is chairman of the Connecticut Rail Commuter Council, a member of the Coastal Corridor Transportation Investment Area, and the Darien Representative Town Meeting. The opinions expressed here are his own, and not necessarily those of the groups on which he serves. You can reach him at jim@camcomm.com or <http://www.trainweb.org/ct>. For the full collection of "Talking Transportation" columns, visit <http://www.talkingtransportation.blogspot.com>

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