

Bus Lines Bloom as Professionals Travel to New York on Cheap

By Raquel Christie



June 13 (Bloomberg) -- Washington lawyer **Victor Schwartz** bills his clients, which include firms such as New York-based **Morgan Stanley**, \$700 an hour for his services. So in these tough economic times, he tries to present them with a smaller transportation bill when he comes up to see them.

"It's \$21 for the bus, versus \$300 for the plane," says Schwartz, 68, a partner at **Shook, Hardy & Bacon LLP**. "They get the same lawyer, the suit is pressed just as well, and I'm ready to roll."

As the U.S. economy contracts, Schwartz is part of a growing trend. Instead of shelling out hundreds of dollars for a flight or trip on Amtrak's **Acela** train, Washington professionals are opting for a more downscale form of travel: the lowly bus.

In recent years, the national capital area has become a hub for buses offering inexpensive service to New York, with a dozen lines, including **Boltbus**, Megabus and DC2NY, charging about \$40 round trip, compared with about \$140 for the lowest cost airfare or \$200 for an express train.

The buses' lower prices, as well as frequent departures, online ticketing, convenient boarding locations and increasingly upscale amenities have lured a well-heeled clientele.

"For the first time, we're seeing briefcase-carrying business travelers consider the bus," says **Joseph Schwieterman**, director of DePaul University's Chaddick **Institute** for Metropolitan Development in Chicago who led a recent **study** on the bus system.

More Trips

Motor-coach travel has grown 20 percent in the past two years, to 751 million passenger trips annually, says Eron Shosteck, head of communications at the Washington-based **American Bus Association**.

Meanwhile, last year saw an 8 percent decline in seat-miles in the airline

industry, a 3 percent decrease in private-vehicle travel, and a slowing in the growth of the number of seat-miles provided by Amtrak trains, the DePaul **study** found.

"We move more people than the airlines in some years, and we move more people in two weeks than Amtrak does in an entire year," Shosteck says.

Washington to New York, with 32,500 departures a year, now ranks as one of the five most-traveled U.S. bus routes, according to the ABA and the **District Department of Transportation**.

The major growth factor is the economy. In a February survey by Megabus, more than 70 percent of the line's passengers, who board near Washington's **Metro Center**, said they would have either driven or flown that day but chose the bus line as a cheaper alternative.

Entertainment Tradeoff

"The tradeoff may be we'll go see the play and go out to dinner, but in order to do that we'll have to take the bus," says **Peter Pantuso**, the ABA's president.

One drawback is that the bus takes longer than air or rail. A bus ride from Washington to New York clocks in at about 4 1/2 hours, compared with about 2 hours and 50 minutes for Amtrak's high-speed Acela service or a 1 1/2 hour flight. Bus enthusiasts say the longer travel time is offset by the convenience of being dropped off in the heart of Manhattan, cutting out costly taxi rides and cumbersome airport security checks.

While **Greyhound Lines Inc.** and **Chinatown buses** were the first on the Washington-New York express route, they have lost dominance as customers have grown from blue-collar workers to students and professionals who demand better travel conditions, Schwieterman says. Greyhound's parent company, Scotland-based **FirstGroup Plc**, Britain's biggest train operator, tapped into the trend last year when it launched Boltbus as a joint venture with Peter Pan Bus Lines.

Amenities

The new lines offer amenities including free wireless Internet, more comfortable seats and electrical outlets. Riders scroll through BlackBerries, craft presentations or troll Facebook.

"It's quiet, it doesn't have all the bumping around of a car, and the people who travel it are professional," says Schwartz, who rides Washington-based **DC2NY**, which boards near **Dupont Circle** or McPherson Square in the center of Washington.

"I have met very interesting people -- students, diplomats, suburban moms I know," says Kay Klausner, 60, who takes New York-based **Vamoose** to visit her son and meet with clients of her cheerleading makeup company, BA*Star. "Before I know it, I'm there."

Safety Concerns

Still, the new generation of inter-city buses has raised safety concerns.

Transportation Secretary **Ray LaHood** on April 30 ordered a safety review of motor coaches, and Senator **Sherrod Brown**, an Ohio Democrat, is pushing legislation to require seat belts and stronger windows to protect occupants in rollover crashes.

In 2007, 51 people died in crashes involving motor coaches, compared with 25 in 1994 and an average of 47 in the past 14 years, according to the Transportation Department.

"There is essentially no regulation, no certification of the vehicles," **National Transportation Safety Board** member **Kitty Higgins** said in an interview in April.

While riding the bus carries a negative connotation for some, converts like Schwartz say the naysayers don't know what they're missing.

"There are people I know in Washington, they look down on you think for taking this bus -- they think you're cheap," Schwartz says. "Well, they don't have to take the bus. It's their loss."

To contact the reporter on this story: **Raquel Christie** in Washington at **rchristie6@bloomberg.net**

Last Updated: June 13, 2009 00:01 EDT