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Looking for America, Greyhound Style

By DEAN NELSON

MY fellow passenger on the bus seemed weary, but he could still appreciate what he was seeing.

"My experience with America is its cities," he said, looking at the cornfields, hills and trees of Iowa. "But I'm realizing that most of the country is what's out this window now. It's beautiful. Much bigger than I thought. Much more peaceful."

He and his family had boarded this Greyhound bus in Manhattan, bound for their Los Angeles home. After vacationing in Greece, they had missed their connecting flight from JFK to LAX airport. They had nonrefundable tickets, he told me, and the airline had wanted an additional \$500 a person (two parents and two children) to complete their trip. They chose the two-and-a-half-day trek by bus, which cost them about \$350 total.

"The bus isn't as bad as I thought," he said.

My sentiments exactly.

Friends had been a bit skeptical when I told them that I was taking my family by bus from San Diego to Chicago and back for our vacation. "Riding the bus across America is the modern-day equivalent of jumping on a boxcar as the train passes through town," one declared. "Are you nuts, or just broke?"

My wife and I had come to the decision about transportation easily. There had been no summer air-fare wars. The train cost as much as a flight. Driving wasn't an option -- my Volvo station wagon had 219,864 miles on it, and I didn't want to break down in Ogallala, Neb., where Swedish cars might be a novelty.

And Greyhound was advertising that travelers could go anywhere in the country for \$89 each way. Kids cost \$69. My son is 8, my daughter 5; to them it sounded like an adventure. Maybe we'd even see Boxcar Willie. Besides, this was a lean year for us, and we had no choice.

As with any form of transportation, there is a system to learn and a culture to adapt to. We were used to flying, during our less-lean periods, so we knew that culture: an expectation of receiving food and drink of some sort, of reasonably polite treatment by the crew. Most airline travelers know, too, that they have to put up with one another for a few hours at most, then never again in their lives.

On a bus, passengers are more open about themselves. The elderly gentleman behind me who stated "All I want in life is enough to eat, and a place to sleep, and some peace of mind" to the stranger next to him has probably never made that declaration at 35,000 feet. The same could be said, I'm sure, for the 20-something muscular man in a tank top who got back on the bus after a brief rest stop in Barstow, Calif., and addressed us with, "I got some bad body odor today, people -- you all just need to know that."

On our trip passengers shared blankets, cassette players, tapes, CD's, headphones, food, coloring books and toys. I got into a conversation about religion with a passenger when another came up from the back and gave me a C. S. Lewis book he was reading. "I think it relates to what you're talking about," he said, and it did.

Part of the bus experience is adjusting to different drivers and their styles. New drivers took over every five to eight hours. If they were smokers, there were more frequent stops. One, whose friendliness at first seemed endearing, caused some concern on our bus when she repeatedly asked passengers for help finding bus stations in Colorado. She told me later that she had been on the job just six months and wasn't liking it very much. (I wouldn't either if I got lost at work.)

We adjusted quickly to the one who pretended to leave several of us at a tiny rest stop near Castle Dale, Utah, for exceeding his five-minute limit. He pulled away with us chasing after him, waving and screaming, then circled back to pick us up.

"You're lucky it was me drivin' and I haven't used up my kindness yet today," he had the nerve to tell my seething wife as she hauled in our panting, terrified kids.

"We pay your wage," she hissed. "You wait."

He seemed to do a little adjusting himself after that.

Then there is the issue of baggage. If you want it to get to your destination, it's up to you to get it from one bus to the next when there's a change. Only once did I forget that, and I had to rescue our things from the unclaimed-baggage area in Las Vegas with only moments to spare. Who knows when I would have seen those suitcases again?

But the biggest adjustment to bus travel is the meal schedule. It accommodates the needs of the vehicle and the driver, not of the passengers. "Meal stops" at 4:30 A.M., 3 P.M., midnight and other odd hours allowed for drivers to change. But it was difficult for those with children who are used to more traditional mealtimes.

I watched my son grimace through a late-night turkey sandwich, which seemed the safest of our choices at the El Bambi cafe in Beaver, Utah. "Next time don't wake me," he said. "This is disgusting."

Despite the quirks of this form of travel, reasons for taking the bus began to emerge. The very things it is criticized for -- long hours of sitting and too many stops in small towns -- became what I liked most. We took an indirect route getting to Chicago so that we could stop and visit relatives along the way. We stopped for a few days in Hastings, Neb., after a 36-hour trip. Then we trekked to Valley City, N.D., for a reunion on the family farm. Then to Minneapolis to see my parents, to Chicago to see my 89-year-old grandmother, then back home to San Diego. By the end of the trip we had gone through California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, Colorado, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois and Iowa. We were gone for three weeks. That meant lots of sitting and lots of small towns and lots of relatives.

It also meant getting to see a magnificent lightning show over the mountains in Utah as the sun went down, a wild grass fire in Colorado, white-water rafters on the Colorado River, riverboats on the Mississippi in Davenport, Iowa, libraries and post offices built at the turn of the century, and beautiful little towns that I would like to live in and otherwise wouldn't have known about, like Eagle, Colo., and Valley City, N.D.

As for the long hours of sitting, they meant I got to read Anne Lamott's "Bird by Bird" and Jim Wallis's "The Soul of Politics" and several journals I had been carrying around in my briefcase for months.

The kids coped pretty well, too, with the length of the ride. They had room at their seats to play. My wife and I got them their own cassette players, headphones and stories on tape, which occupied them for an hour at a time.

We also gave them both notebooks and cameras at the beginning of the trip so they could record their impressions. My son kept a journal (his younger sister drew pictures), jotting down sights and smells throughout the day. They looked out the window a lot. "Nebraska is prettier than California," my son declared. He read for long stretches. My daughter discovered paper dolls. They had packed their own carry-on bags, and we had surprises for them, like a new book or tape, each day.

EVEN sleeping at night exceeded our expectations. The seats felt more spacious than on an airplane, and they reclined. The bus was mostly quiet. And people generally turned their lights off around 10 o'clock.

"It's kind of like camping," our daughter said as she pulled on some sweat pants for the night. "Can we sleep on the bus tomorrow night, too?" asked our son.

It wouldn't take much for Greyhound to make its mode of transportation more competitive with cars or trains. But it would mean acknowledging that people eat at regular intervals, and that they prefer food that is recognizable. Of the scores of stops we made from San Diego to Chicago and back, only four had food that was prepared on site. The others had vending machines or nothing at all.

And I could live with slightly higher fares if Greyhound would hire someone to clean the bathrooms at the stations. Even those, though, were an improvement over the ones in the buses, which were horrifying. Fortunately, the longest stretch of uninterrupted travel was four hours, and the drivers were pretty responsive to requests for stops.

"Did you learn your lesson?" my boxcar-fixated friend asked when we returned home after 48 hours on the road. "Would you do it again?"

I was afraid to ask the rest of my family, in case it had been worse for them than I'd thought. So I peeked in my son's journal: "The trip back was better than the trip to our vacation," he wrote. "One of the reasons was that they didn't wake us up at 4 in the morning to dust the bus.

"I will probably go on another trip like this, and do it just for fun."

My sentiments exactly.

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