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Chinatown Bus Lines Are A Budget Traveler's Dream

By Violet Sorenson

A guide to the Chinatown Bus

The word is out—the cheapest way to get from one major U.S. city to another is on the "Chinatown bus". In recent years this has become transportation option of choice for budget travelers in New York, Washington DC, and Boston, and more recently on the West Coast. Students, backpackers, and an array of other savvy travelers have long loved the rock bottom prices that these bus companies offer. Despite the popularity of these bus lines it can still be difficult to find information on Chinatown bus service.

What exactly is a "Chinatown Bus"? Read on and you will have the inside track on this great budget travel option.

Chinatown Bus history

The Chinatown bus phenomenon began in the late 1990s when an entrepreneur in New York's Chinatown started running daily bus service from Chinatown in New York to Chinatown in Boston. The service was aimed at Asian immigrants who wanted to shop or visit relatives in either city and needed cheap and convenient transportation. The service was bare bones—no advertising, customer service, or bus stations. Customers simply went to the bus stop, waited for the bus (or van), and paid the driver upon boarding. For those willing to do without frills, they offered virtually the same service as traditional bus companies at a substantially lower price. Before long, the word spread and all kinds of people started using the service. It became especially popular with students, budget travelers, or people for whom the service was simply more convenient.

Soon more bus companies duplicated this model and started offering service in other cities. Now you can find this type of bus service in Philadelphia, Virginia, Baltimore Washington DC, Los Angeles, Las Vegas and San Francisco. At this point the term "Chinatown bus" is used more loosely to describe this sort of low-cost/low-frills service. Many, if not most, of the companies do not have Chinatown as their main location and may not cater to the immigrant population at all. These operators are also sometimes referred to as "curbside" operators.

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How can tickets be so cheap?

\$15 between New York to Boston? \$25 from Las Vegas to Los Angeles? It seems hard to fathom. Chinatown bus companies are able to keep prices low because they operate in a fundamentally different way from traditional carriers. Foremost, the service is very basic. There is little in the way of customer service or amenities. Most of these operators do not have formal stations, picking up passengers at bus stops instead. They eschew traditional advertising in favor of word of mouth. Further, many of the operators play a very hands-on role in the operation—you will not see idle executives at a small independent bus company. Finally, these operators make sure they fill their buses. That is why Chinatown bus operators usually only operate on heavily trafficked routes. Indeed some companies only run buses at peak times.

Are they safe?

When these companies first started operating, concerns were raised about safety standards. There is still controversy within the bus industry about whether these newcomers are complying with the same regulations as the traditional companies. However, a task force set up by the Federal government to look at safety issues found that Chinatown bus companies did not perform better or worse than other types of bus companies (ie. charter, tour buses). All bus companies operating in the U.S. must undergo the same inspection standards and must comply with the same rules. Realistically there is probably a range of quality among Chinatown bus carriers. Some are fly-by-night operators trying to make a fast buck, while others are legitimate entrepreneurs who plan to grow and operate a long term business.

What you should expect

à No frills service—the driver may be the ticket collector; there will not be a lot of customer service.

à Comfortable buses. Despite the low fares buses are usually quite nice. Most buses are comparable to Greyhound and many are actually more deluxe.

à Communication challenges. Drivers are legally required to speak enough English to help passengers in the case of emergency. In reality this is often adhered to rather loosely. At the very least, expect your driver to have an accent.

à Possible delays. Many of these bus routes are on highly congested roads. When the roads are busy, expect delays.

à Rest stops. Buses will have a lavatory on board but there is usually a 10 or 15 minute bathroom break on trips over 4 hours. Don't be late returning to the bus, the driver will not count heads before leaving at the appointed time.

à Full buses. Buses definitely sell out at peak times (weekends and evenings). Book ahead or get there early if you want secure a seat.

à Plastic Bags. An odd little quirk on Chinatown buses is that every aisle seat usually has a plastic

grocery bag tied to the arm. I guess they find this is the best way to keep the buses clean.

How do I find the Chinatown Bus?

Again, "Chinatown bus" is a term used to describe a type of operator and not an individual bus company. Many unrelated bus companies fall into this category. Since most Chinatown buses do not spend money on advertising it can be difficult to find out details about schedules and bus stop locations. Many of the carriers are becoming savvier about the Internet and quite a few have websites with information. Usually an Internet search will yield links to bus service to your destination. There are also several directories, such as chinatown-bus.org that include links for most Chinatown bus companies and the author's employer, GotoBus.com, is a centralized booking site that has schedules and sells tickets online for most Chinatown bus companies.

The Chinatown bus is not for everyone. If you want an orderly system with American style customer service, you should probably stick to traditional carriers. However, if you know what to expect and come prepared with a sense of adventure and humor, you should enjoy the trip just fine. You will also enjoy the money you save!

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Getting Around The Usa—When Is The Bus Your Best Option?

By Lila Kahn

Visitors to the US have many options when it comes to getting around. In the land of (relatively) cheap gas and expensive trains, renting a car is often the most appealing option. On the other hand, for journeys between cities that are further than a few hours drive, flying quickly becomes a viable option. Still there are other times when the best option is taking the bus. How should you determine when this is your best option? Read on.

Bus travel in the US

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Whether or not it is warranted, bus travel has a somewhat beleaguered reputation in the U.S. Many consider line run bus service to offer the most basic level of service. In truth there is a wide range of service offered, from luxury to budget, depending on the bus carrier. The bus industry in the United States is dominated by Greyhound, which is the only bus company with service nationwide. Several other companies such as Trailways and Coach USA are made up of independently owned bus companies that share marketing functions and branding. In addition there are several strong regional players in the bus industry, although they may share service with Greyhound on certain routes.

A newer development in the bus industry is the "Chinatown bus". This is a term used to describe low priced bus companies that operate paired down service on selected routes and charge much less than traditional bus companies. Originally these carriers tended to operate in, and cater to, the Chinese immigrant community. Now the phenomenon appeals to a much wider group of customers. Another trend in the bus industry is luxury service that competes more directly with the airlines. These carriers offer first class amenities and luxury coaches. They tend to be most successful for destinations that are fewer than 6 hours apart.

So, how should you decide when the bus is your best option? Here are a few questions that might help you make your decision:

1. What is your budget?

If you are on a tight budget you won't be able to beat the bus for price. It is by far the least expensive way to get between destinations in the U.S. This is particularly true on heavily traveled routes in the Northeast where there is a lot of competition.

2. Will you need a car once you get to your destination? In many U.S. cities (ie. New York, Boston, Washington DC) a car is not only unnecessary, but will be a burden to drive and to park once you arrive.

3. How far are you going?

If you are traveling less than a five or six hours it is probably faster to take the bus than to fly when you factor in waiting time at the airport. Moreover, the bus will likely drop you off in the downtown core so you do not have to find your way into the city once you arrive.

4. Where are you going?

It is worth noting that for many more remote destinations in the US, the bus is really the only public transportation option. If you do not drive, taking the bus may be your only choice.

5. How much time do you have?

If your trip is not rushed, you might enjoy the more leisurely pace of bus travel. If you are under time pressure, the bus is probably not the best choice as it is subject to traffic delays and usually takes a little longer than other modes of transportation.

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Overall, the bus is a great option for visitors to the US who are looking for transportation between major US cities and more remote destinations alike. As gas prices rise and train service sees more cuts, it will undoubtedly be an even more popular way to get around going forward.

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