

Want To Tour The Us For Less? Head To Chinatown.

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Want To Tour The Us For Less? Head To Chinatown.

By Violet Sorenson

Bargain hunters don't only go to Chinatown for knock off designer handbags, they also look there to find the best prices on bus tours of America. Travelers in east and west coast US cities have come to love the "Chinatown Bus" for their no-frills service and rock bottom prices. However, the bargains do not stop there. If you want to find the cheapest way to see the most popular tourist attractions in the US, try a Chinatown tour operator.

Just as Chinatown bus service began by catering to the recent immigrant community, for years these tour operators have targeting their tours only to the Chinese speaking community. However, more recently they have been discovered by the broader market and are increasingly popular for visitors to the US and residents alike.

Sayaka Singh who lives in New York said that any time she has family visiting from India they inevitably want to take a trip to Niagara Falls. She discovered several Chinatown tour companies online and has since sent many family members to the Falls with them. She said, "You can't beat it, for less than a hundred dollars they get transportation in a nice motorcoach, hotel accommodations, a tour of the Falls area, and several other stops along the way. They loved it." Several of her relatives then booked a tour to Washington DC.

What to expect

These are definitely budget tours, but the value they deliver is truly unbeatable. Hotels are usually 2-star level but they tend to be national chains and are quite adequate. Plan on something equivalent to a Travelodge, however many times the hotel quality is higher. Hotels are commonly not situated in the downtown core of the city or right near an attraction.

In a style typical of tours throughout Asia, the tour itinerary is usually quite full. The pace of these tours is very rapid. You will see as many attractions as possible but will not stay at any one attraction for very long. This can be frustrating for people who like to linger or have time to explore. It is perfect for travelers who want to see a lot in a short period of time.

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People from all over the world go on these tours and it is impossible to predict the demographic makeup of a group. However, do not expect an "all-American" crowd. You should expect multilingual tour guide and many non-English speakers on the tour. Many people cite the mix of people as their favorite aspect of the tours ("I felt like I was part of a UN delegation, it was great!"). The tour guide will not give an in-depth narrated tour and will speak in both Chinese and English. The tour guide will also arrange for the group to stop for meals. This is usually simple fare such as a rest stop food court or a Chinese restaurant.

How do they do it?

\$99 for a 3-day tour from Los Angeles to Las Vegas and the Grand Canyon; \$85 for a 2-day tour from NYC to Washington DC, Baltimore, and Philadelphia—it is hard to fathom how they can offer such low fares.

These companies run very streamlined operations and work on slim margins. The key to their model is that the tour buses are full. They tend to operate tours only to the most popular destinations (ie. Grand Canyon, San Francisco, Niagara Falls, Washington DC), and they sometimes cancel a tour if not enough people book it. Often these tour companies use charter buses and therefore do not have the expense of maintaining and operating a fleet of buses, something that may not really be their area of expertise.

Since the tour companies run tours on a regular schedule, they are able to negotiate very good room rates with hotels. Therefore they can still offer low rates even during a busy time of year. They also save money by paying their tour guides very little. Customers are expected to tip the tour guides and this really their main source of compensation.

What exactly is included?

All tours include hotel, tour guide and transportation. Most include entrance fees to any national parks when applicable. Some also include admission to attractions. Read the tour details carefully or inquire before you book if you are not sure. Optional tours can add to the cost of your tour and you should budget accordingly. Usually the tour guide will organize the optional tours for the group and you will pay the guide directly.

How do I find these tours?

Almost any city that has a sizable Asian population will most likely have a tour operator specializing in multi-day budget tours. New York, Boston, San Francisco, Vancouver, and Los Angeles have dozens of tour operators. Most likely they will not advertise in the same places that traditional tour companies do. Your best bet is to look online.

These tours are a terrific option for travelers who want to see some of America's most popular sights but do not have a lot of time and want a great value. For far less than you would pay if you went on your own, you can sit back and have someone else make all the arrangements for you. As an added bonus you will also get to experience a great diversity of cultures along the way.

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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

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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.

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.

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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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