



OPTION TO FLYING, DRIVING

Distance Travel By Bus Revives

Upgrades, Fares As Low As \$1 Lure Riders

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

With gasoline topping \$4 a gallon and airlines piling on surcharges, more central Ohioans are turning to an old standby: the bus.

Low-cost carrier Megabus has had a 35 percent increase in Columbus traffic this year. Longtime hauler Greyhound, which last year wrapped up a \$60 million investment in buses and terminals (including the Columbus station), also says business is up this summer.

Nationwide, bus travel between cities has risen 13 percent since 2006, the first increase in more than 40 years, according to a study by DePaul University in Chicago.

"No one wants to take the bus, but driving and flying is so expensive," Ohio University student Alana Newman said as she waited for a Greyhound bus bound for Washington, D.C., last week.

Her parents said they couldn't foot the gasoline bill to drive from their Virginia home to Athens and back. They bought the 21-year-old a \$43 one-way ticket instead.

Sheryl Johnson paid \$2.50 for her round-trip Megabus ticket to Chicago on Thursday.

With two girlfriends and her 10-year-old goddaughter in tow, she was all set for a ladies' weekend of shopping and dining with cash to spare.

"It's perfect," said Johnson, 40, of Blacklick.

Chicago-based Megabus offers fares as low as \$1 for its twice-daily, nonstop service to the Windy City (prices increase as seats fill).

The company, a subsidiary of Coach USA, saves passengers money by offering curbside pickup and Web-only booking.

Ron Cappelletti recently bought his 20-year-old daughter, Maggie, a \$20 Megabus ticket to Chicago, where she attends art school.

"It's a whole lot cheaper," said Mr. Cappelletti, of Upper Arlington. "Southwest (Airlines) used to be really cheap, but they're not anymore. And this drops you off in downtown Chicago, right where she lives."

Ron and his wife, Gay, said they're considering taking Megabus this summer.

Yet the bare-bones concept hasn't avoided trouble. Megabus dropped the last of its West Coast routes this month, citing low ridership. It left Columbus for several months in 2006 after a lackluster launch, but it returned last year.

The company refocused, adding New York routes and equipping some buses with free on-board wireless Internet access and personal headsets.

"Affluent travelers are finding this is a great alternative," said Dale Moser, president and chief operating officer of Megabus. "We continue to see month-on-month growth."

Greyhound, which eliminated more than 1,000 routes in 2004, is vying for a piece of the same business. The Dallas-based company launched Bolt Bus this year, offering promotional \$1 fares and flashy new vehicles boasting Wi-Fi, plentiful plug-in outlets and flushable toilets. Bolt Bus is not offered here.

Such perks and prices could be a blessing for the bus industry, which is plagued by stereotypes of down-on-their-luck passengers and crotchety drivers.

"The perception is changing," said Eron Shostek, spokesman for the American Bus Association. "Today's modern motor coaches are nothing like the buses people remember taking in college."

Greyhound spokesman Dustin Clark highlighted recent changes to the Columbus terminal, including flat-screen televisions, improved lighting and tighter security.

He couldn't provide 2008 numbers but said the company is experiencing an upswing in ridership after two years of single-digit-percentage declines.

"Our buses are full," Clark said. "We are prepared and expecting a big summer."

The price might be right, but bus travel still has its downside.

Longer trips might require extended layovers at unsavory stops, sometimes late at night. Greyhound tickets are flexible and can be used for up to one year, leaving ample room for overbooked routes. Megabus doesn't accept walk-up fares.

And it can take a while to get places.

Abbi Leonard, an 18-year-old from Bangor, Maine, was headed home after visiting a friend last week in Lima, Ohio, a journey that would take 34 hours each way.

The cost of flying (about \$500) was "insanely crazy" for the recent high-school graduate. Greyhound bus fare set her back \$140.

"I really don't see it being that bad," Leonard said. "It's summer. You just need the patience."

Ed Kowalski plans to increase his bus travel this year. The chef, who lives near Downtown, recently sold his 1990 Ford Taurus and relies on COTA.

Next week, he'll head to the Taste of Chicago festival on Megabus for \$33. He also is considering Greyhound to visit his son in Albuquerque, N.M., a \$200 savings over airfare, he found.

"Someone made a comment that I was crazy," said Kowalski, 43. "And my response was: 'What's crazier -- taking the bus for \$30 or paying four bucks a gallon to fill your SUV?' "

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