

Destinations

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Fly the Friendly Skies?

Not when intercity bus travel is plush and luxe



Fasten your seatbelts—the world of intercity bus travel is changing, and in a luxurious way. Around the United States, regional operators have introduced bus service so plush that travelers would almost swear they’re flying first class.

“This is a new generation of bus service,” observes Robert Poole, director of transportation policy at the Reason Foundation, a public policy think tank based in Los Angeles. “The growth in the past four to seven years has been phenomenal.”

“Business class and luxury service remain on a growth trajectory with expansion centered on specialty lines rather than national carriers,” says Professor Joseph P. Schwieterman, director of DePaul University’s Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development, in a 2017 motorcoach industry trends report.

Sit Back, Relax, and Enjoy

This trend may herald a nationwide return to the sort of bus travel experiences not seen since the 1950s and 1960s. That’s when Trailways’ Five-Star Thru-Liner

Service gave passengers the white-glove treatment on long-distance routes, with perfectly coiffed stewardesses serving coffee, juice, and sandwiches—all while wearing high heels.

Today the stilettos may be gone, but travelers are getting the point. For example, businesspeople and day-trippers are learning that if you ride one of LimoLiner’s four daily runs from New York to Boston, you can book a reserved seat online and wait for pickup at a luxury downtown hotel (and get a discount on lodging there). Onboard, an attendant will bring you a hot catered meal while you recline in a broad leather seat and enjoy satellite TV or Wi-Fi.

“We have a loyal following and good brand awareness,” says LimoLiner President and CEO Mark Richardson, who, along with partners, bought the Stoughton, Mass., company in 2014. “It’s a unique business. Our main competition is trains, not other bus companies,” says the 25-year industry veteran. Indeed, his company’s website plays up a recent TV news report: “LimoLiner Beats Amtrak in Race from Boston to New York.”

Speedy Options

LimoLiner is not alone in offering such speedy luxury service in the Northeast. Concord Coach Lines recently expanded its “Plus” service from New York City to Portland, Maine. With first class-style seating, coaches owned by this Concord, N.H.-based ABA member zoom directly to the Big Apple nonstop without pausing in Boston. What’s more, it started direct service from Concord and Nashua, N.H., to Manhattan this past February.

Meanwhile, in Florida, ABA member RedCoach has literally gone further with premium-level routes that link 11 far-flung Sunshine State cities including Miami, Orlando, Tampa, and Tallahassee. The company, an offshoot of Argentina’s huge Grupo Plaza transportation provider, has no competition in its niche.

“When we started here six years ago, everyone in the industry said you’re not going to make it. They said people aren’t going to get out of their cars,” recalls Vice President Florencia Cirigliano. “We have worked very hard to change people’s mindsets, and we’ve grown because we saw there was a need that no one was addressing.” Like LimoLiner, her company believes it competes against Amtrak and the airlines.

Not to be outdone, Dallas-based Vonlane targets business travelers tired of airport delays and security hassles. For prices comparable to airfares, passengers enjoy 22-seat buses that ply the Texas Triangle equipped with private, six-seat boardrooms.

“Our onboard service makes you feel like you’re on a private jet and lets you make the most of your valuable time,” says founder Alex Danza. **D**—George Spencer