

# **TRIPTIPS**

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**WITH THE RISING COSTS** of gasoline and airline tickets, maybe it's time to consider taking a charter motorcoach tour...you may be surprised by the accessible amenities.

When was the last time you took an intercity bus or a charter motorcoach tour? If the answer is never, then you're not alone. According to a 2002 Bureau of Transportation Statistics study, less than 5 percent of Americans, with or without disabilities, who travel long distance use either mode of transport. But given the increasing difficulty of air travel and the rising cost of driving, maybe it's time to consider taking the bus, at least for shorter trips.

For one thing, you'll be surprised at how roomy intercity buses are compared to economy class on airplanes. There's also no security line, no torturous aisle chair and you can ride in your own wheelchair if you prefer. The price is also right, with many companies offering a discounted companion fare to individuals who need assistance during travel. And in bad weather when the planes are all grounded, the bus will generally still make the run. Another plus is not having to worry about lost luggage or a damaged wheelchair.

## **ADA Bus Regulations**

To insure a trouble-free and accessible trip, you do, however, need to know your rights and obligations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The Department of Transportation (DOT) "Final Rule for Over-The-Road Buses" (OTRB's) only came fully into effect in October 2002 and has differing

requirements based on the size of the bus company and the type of service provided—fixed route scheduled service, charter/tour service or a mixture of the two. For full details, a fact sheet entitled “Getting On Board: Facts for Customers of Motorcoach Service” can be downloaded from Easter Seals Project Action.

At present if you need a lift-equipped bus, you must give 48-hour advance notice. Not until 2012, when the fleets of large, fixed route carriers like Greyhound are required to become 100 per cent lift-equipped, will advance notice finally be eliminated for the bulk of accessible trips. Even now, however, "if the request is made closer to the time of travel, the operator must make a reasonable effort to locate an accessible bus."

If you're traveling with a group and someone else arranges the charter, you should call the organizer again prior to the 48-hour deadline to confirm that the lift-equipped coach was indeed requested. Many travel planners have the misimpression that it costs more to reserve a lift-equipped coach. In fact bus companies by law cannot charge more, even when they must lease the accessible coach from another company to meet the request.

An OTRB is defined in the rule as "a bus characterized by an elevated passenger deck located over a baggage compartment." Each accessible OTRB is required to have a lift and at least two wheelchair securement locations. Lifts must accommodate not only wheelchairs but also "persons using walkers, crutches and braces or who otherwise have difficulty using steps." Drivers may not be aware of the latter requirement, so you may need to insist on your right to use the lift if you are ambulatory.

Wheelchair locations are assigned on a first come-first served basis. Additional wheelchair users have the option of transferring to a seat and having their wheelchair stowed in the baggage compartment. Having only two tiedowns may not be a problem for intercity service, but for disability groups who wish to charter a coach, it presents a major barrier. There are, however, some proactive bus companies, like Paradise Trailways in Long Island, which have installed additional securements.

While accessible onboard toilets are not mandated by the rule, assistance must be provided to enable passengers with disabilities to leave and return to the bus during rest stops like everyone else. On express runs of three hours without a rest stop, if a passenger with a disability is unable to use the inaccessible restroom onboard and requests an unscheduled rest stop, the operator "must make a good faith effort" to comply.

## **Filing a Complaint**

Although accessible motorcoaches are now in plentiful supply all over the U.S., you may still encounter bus companies that say they do not provide lift-equipped service. Ask first to speak to a manager but then, if the story remains the same, please go to the DOT Web site and file a complaint. Thanks to such complaints and resulting enforcement actions, even the Chinese bus companies providing curbside service in the Northeast are now investing in accessible coaches.

The large, mainstream tour companies that offer group motorcoach tours must also accommodate passengers with disabilities. Few, however, do so willingly since it means not only contracting for accessible buses, but also ensuring that the attractions, restaurants, rest stops and hotels visited during the tour are accessible. Wheelchair users calling for reservations are commonly told they cannot be accommodated unless they can climb the coach steps and store their wheelchair or scooter in the baggage compartment. As yet these violations of the ADA have not been challenged, most likely because those being denied service do not know their rights. If you wish to book a tour and are told it is not wheelchair accessible, do file a complaint with the DOT.

## **New Curbside Bus Service**

Now for some positive news. For bus riders on the West Coast, Midwest and Northeast, intercity express service has become even more affordable. Megabus.com, a division of Coach USA, offers fares beginning at \$1 for the first ticket booked online. Their daily curbside service, which currently links 8 cities in California and Nevada and 17 cities in the Midwest, expanded this May to the East Coast, with stops in Boston, New York City, Atlantic City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Buffalo and Toronto, Canada. Megabus mainly uses low-floor double-decker coaches with ramps rather than lifts. Perks include free WiFi hotspots and videos. For wheelchair service, one must call their toll-free number 48 hours in advance.

BoltBus, a subsidiary of Greyhound and Peter Pan Bus Lines, also launched curbside service this March between Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington, DC. Its fleet of new coaches is entirely lift-equipped and offers free WiFi and power plug-ins. An online "Special Needs" form allows riders to specify if they are traveling with a wheelchair. Prices again start at \$1.

## **Road Resources**

### **U.S. Department of Transportation**

[www.dot.gov](http://www.dot.gov)

### **Easter Seals Project Action**

[www.projectaction.org](http://www.projectaction.org)

**Bolt Bus**

[www.boltbus.com](http://www.boltbus.com)

**MegaBus**

[www.megabus.com](http://www.megabus.com)

Wheelchair Reservations: 800-

**Greyhound Lines**

[www.greyhound.com](http://www.greyhound.com)

Access Greyhound: 800-752-4841

**Trailways**

[www.trailways.com](http://www.trailways.com)

**United Motorcoach Association**

[www.uma.org](http://www.uma.org)

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Reprinted from *Venture Magazine*, August/September 2008

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