

The Travelin' Grampa

Touring the U.S.A. without an automobile

Focus on fast, safe, convenient, comfortable, cheap travel, via public transit.

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Illustration credits: Transbay Joint Powers Authority; Metropolitan Transportation Commission.



Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi at ceremony launching construction of new Transbay transportation center, which will be the apex of an entirely new San Francisco livable neighborhood, envisioned at right.

Transbay Transportation Center rises in San Francisco

“A new grand Central Station of the West” that reflects “the future of transit-oriented development in the Bay Area” is rising in downtown San Francisco. That’s how that city’s giant new Transbay Transportation Center, currently under construction, was described by Nancy Pelosi, the famous U.S. Congresswoman, as she helped pour concrete for its foundation.

While walking from the CalTrain to a BART station, *Grampa* recently visited the construction site, a four city block square area situated between Mission, Beale, 2nd, and Natoma streets.

“This visionary project has already begun to transform San Francisco, breathing new life into the South of Market neighborhood, stimulating smart growth, and encouraging mass transit in the City and the region,” said Mayor Edwin M. Lee.

Cost of the entire complex is expected to exceed \$4-billion. Its transit terminal segment is funded largely by \$400-million via the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act, better known as “The Stimulus.” Does anyone remember that? Turns out, it was a success, after all...

Pelosi began pouring the 60,000 cubic yards of concrete for the complex’s huge 5-foot thick foundation. When complete, the complex will contain several big office buildings and 2,600 residences. “We are creating a walkable and bikeable community where residents and workers have convenient access to rapid and safe public transit and a full range of neighborhood amenities,” said Transbay Joint Powers Authority chairperson Jane Kim.

Slated to open in 2017, the transit terminal will handle buses and trains of more than a dozen public transportation systems serving at least eight Bay Area counties and, California Gov. Jerry Brown promises, a future high-speed railroad. Also, a new Caltrain railroad station.

Passenger finds bag Grampa lost on airport bus

Grampa recently flew to Tampa to attend the University of South Florida graduation of his granddaughter Kimberly. As usual, he rode a SEPTA transit bus to Philadelphia International Airport and placed his suitcase in the luggage space at the front of the bus, which was quite crowded. Later, as the passengers became fewer, a seat next to his luggage became available. He changed seats. When he did, he inasdvterntly left behind a small bag containing his boarding pass, medicines and vitamins, mini-radio, etc. As the bus neared the airport, he reached for this bag. It wasn't there. Suddenly, terror struck him. "Someone had stolen it," he thought. "I can't go to Florida without my medicine. The trip is off. It's a nonrefundable ticket."

Then he calmed down, recalling a previous situation, when he had arrived at the airport without his photo-ID card. After leaving the bus, *Grampa* walked across to the other side of the airline terminal to a taxi stand, hailed a cab, went back home, got another week's supply of pills, while the cab awaited, and then sped back to the airport. Cab round-trip cost \$50.

At the US Airways baggage check-in counter, he related his plight and got a boarding pass marked "priority security." Upon showing this to the TSA attendant upstairs, he was whisked through the security check point within a few minutes. An uneventful flight and a delightful week followed, including rides with his granddaughter on Tampa's TECO Streetcar. They trod where *Grampa*'s own grampa had walked in 1898 when he served as a U.S. Army soldier there during the Spanish American War.

After *Grampa* arrived in Tampa, he phoned home to tell his sad tale about the "stolen" shoulder bag. "Just in case it wasn't," he asked his daughter-in-law Nancy, "would you please call SEPTA lost and found?" She did. Next day she retrieved it at SEPTA's 69th Street Terminal. Turns out, a passenger saw it sitting on an empty seat and handed it to the bus driver. When *Grampa* returned home a week later, he looked inside. Nothing missing. Gloves, scarf, medicine, boarding pass, mini-radio, money, etc. – everything there as it had been.

MORAL: (1) Always allow plenty of time to catch a flight, in case something unforeseen might occur, and (2) Transit bus passengers are more honest than you might suspect.

Returned items debunk finder's keeper theory

A tourist age 66 from Hawaii lost his wallet at Philadelphia's 30th street railroad station on January 2. It contained his driver license, credit card, etc. and \$600 in cash. After flying back home on Jan. 11, he got a phone call from the American Automobile Association, of which he is a member. The AAA said his wallet had been found. Turns out, on Jan. 7, an anonymous woman turned it in to SEPTA's Lost & Found at 30th Street Station. The Hawaiian's AAA card and driver license enabled SEPTA to track him down. After the wallet was returned to him, he noted that everything he remembered being in it was still there, including the \$600 cash.

Grampa learned of this incident reading a column written by Helen Ubinas in the *Philadelphia Daily News*, where *Grampa* many years ago worked as a copyboy, Radio Editor, sometime TV columnist, and Assistant Makeup Editor.

If you leave a valuable item behind on a commuter train going toward or away from center city Philadelphia, chances are it will find its way to the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority's Lost & Found office at Suburban Station. Some months, as many as 1,000 lost items are received and cataloged there. Some are of incalculable value, such as a passenger's smart phone holding family photos. Others have current monetary value, such as a commuter's monthly pass. Among items retrieved by SEPTA Rail passengers: a single shoe, a glass eye, false teeth, a whole cooked chicken, a New Yorker traveler's purse containing \$4,000 in cash.

LOST & FOUND

Photo credits: U.S. Dept. of State; W.W. White; Giant Eagle; Wikipedia; Sprint; Comstock Ltd.



Things passengers have left behind on aircraft have included passports, dentures, bag of onions, live parrot, phones, bag of diamonds, live falcon, live frog, glass eye, and of course handbags, wallets and eyeglasses.

Passengers leave behind almost anything you can imagine

Besides many purses, wallets, eyeglasses and keys, airline passengers leave behind some bizarre items after they exit their flights. Among them: dentures, a glass eye, a prosthetic leg, a bag of onions, bag of diamonds, bag of sand, and a live frog, live turtle, live parrot, and live hawk. So finds a poll of 700 commercial airline flight attendants by airfare comparison website Skyscanner. Other items discovered by cabin crew: a written marriage proposal, wedding dress, bass violin, undershorts, panties, a box of dried fish, a woman's wig, a man's toupee, handcuffs, and a raw egg. Items most found: passports 24%, phones 23% and books 21%.

Rider leaves \$1,100 in cash on Boston #73 bus

Back in May, a rider left an envelope containing \$1,100 in cash on a Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority #73 trackless trolleybus. A passenger who said she found it on a seat handed it to the bus driver. He informed MBTA's bus control center about the envelope, on which were printed the words Cambridge Savings Bank. He was instructed to turn it over to a supervisor at the end of the line. When he reached there, he looked inside and saw the money.

Later, he told news media he never was tempted to take any of it. "I look at it this way," he said. "Somebody needed it for some reason. It could be their paycheck. Or their rent money."

MBTA issued a press release saying an amount of cash had been left on one of its buses, without identifying the amount or bus route.

MBTA Transit Police and the bank tracked down the envelope's owner.

Canadian bus driver returns wallet with \$1,200

In Calgary, Canada, a female passenger handed a Calgary Transit bus driver a wallet she found on his bus. It contained \$1,200 cash. He turned it in to the transit system's Lost & Found office. It called the owner's home and spoke to his daughter, who said she was just about to phone the transit agency about the missing wallet and its \$1,200 contents. Once it was determined her father was indeed its owner, Calgary Transit arranged for father, daughter and bus driver to meet and pose for pictures of the "official" turning over of the wallet from driver to owner.

Wallets are left behind often, said the driver. He said he found three in one week.

Bibles, yoga mats, architectural prints forgotten on trains

Among items left behind on trains mentioned in a *Philadelphia Magazine* story about SEPTA's Lost & Found are: books, bibles, umbrellas, canes, crutches, skateboards, architectural blueprints, many electronic devices, yoga mats, a baby stroller, a guitar, art portfolios, a trophy, cowboy hats, and a brand-new comforter.

1,203 bicycles left on Twin-Cities buses and trains

Of the 19,994 items Minneapolis-St. Paul Metro Transit riders left behind in 2012, an incredible 1,203 were bicycles. Metro's lost & found office holds most items for two weeks, but bicycles one week, due to space limitations.

What else does Metro Transit Lost & Found get? Mostly: gloves, mobile phones, wallets, umbrellas and backpacks. Among the unusual: a leaf blower, kiddie pool, microwave oven, and – believe it or not – a box containing a human skull, later claimed by an anatomy professor.

Items found by drivers on buses and trains are turned in to Metro Transit's five bus garages or rail facilities and delivered to Lost & Found by 7:30 am the next business day. If they contain contact information, Lost & Found notifies the owner. The staff follows any clue it can find on the forgotten object to find the owner.

Many more bikes forgotten on buses than are stolen

Portland, Oregon, enjoys the nickname Pedaltown. Maybe more than anyplace, this is where you'll find more bicycle riders bringing bikes along while riding on public transit. Asked how best to prevent the theft of a bike mounted on the front of a bus, a spokesperson for TriMet, the public transit system there, recently offered this bit of wisdom:

“Sit close to the front of the bus. Keep an eye on it. Exit the front door.”

Also, TriMet strongly suggested: “Tell the operator you have mounted a bike on the front. This way you are less likely to leave the bus on the rack after getting off the bus, which happens much more frequently than theft.”

TriMet stands for Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District of Oregon.

Bus bikers get ‘remember to take your bike’ cards

On the side of the farebox on CARTS and Cherriots buses in Salem, Oregon, and vicinity is a holder containing Bicycle Reminder Cards. All riders take one who put a bicycle on the rack on the front of the bus, to remind them to retrieve it after getting off. Cherriots and CARTS are buses of the Salem Area Mass Transit District, based in Salem, Oregon's third largest city.

Wallets, wheelchairs, even rabbits, found on Dublin buses

Dublin Bus, which *Grampa* enjoyed while in Ireland, says passengers leave about 600 valuable items a month on its buses. Filled shopping bags are the most numerous. Next are umbrellas and mobile phones. Even items for babies and the handicapped are forgotten. “We get many baby buggies and plenty of crutches,” a Dublin Bus lost property office clerk told the *Dublin Herald* newspaper. Recently a wheelchair and a walker were turned in. “There were a lot of laptops” before a current economic downturn, he said, but “people now are more careful of their valuable possessions. ... We had two rabbits a few years ago. A worker took them home with her to look after them.”

Australian riders forget guitars, skateboards, bags of money

How does someone manage to leave behind a guitar on a bus? They do. Guitars and other musical instruments are among items left on Sunbus, public transit system of the tourist-attractive Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia. Operations manager Brett Lee told *Sunshine Coast Daily* the Sunbus lost property office has received and returned to their owners: bags of money, a briefcase full of signed checks, golf clubs, false teeth, iPads, skateboards and bicycle helmets, in addition to the usual wallets, phones, keys, etc. “One passenger left one walking crutch on board,” he said. “This is strange. He would have to hop off the bus without it.” Items not returned to owners are donated to the Salvation Army if unclaimed after a month.

LOST & FOUND

Photo credits: New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority; San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency.



Umbrellas, keys and toys are among items most frequently left behind on transit buses and trains.

New York riders leave behind 50,000 items annually

Lost & Found sections of New York City's bus, subway and commuter railroad systems get more than 50,000 lost items each year. Among them: handbags, wallets, briefcases, umbrellas, keys, toys, eyeglasses, bags of groceries, clothing, backpacks, bicycles, e-readers, mp3 players, skateboards, household appliances, cameras, automobile parts, expensive jewelry, even birds and animals. One passenger lost a tuba, others an artificial leg, dentures, a vacuum cleaner, a 3-ft. tall karate tournament trophy, and a pet rabbit. Objects recently recovered by forgetful New York subway and bus riders are included: a motorized scooter, an electric popcorn popper, a pair of boxing gloves, and a briefcase containing \$2,000 in cash.

"We get false teeth almost every week," a New York City Transit lost property unit manager told a *New York Post* reporter. His department collects and catalogs about 26,000 items a year.

Metro-North RR's lost & found located beneath Grand Central Station gets between 100 to 150 lost items daily. Many claimants are tourists and other out-of-towners.

Some items have great sentimental value, such as a scarf hand-knitted by a since-deceased grandmother. "I've seen people cry when they get their stuff back," said a lost & found clerk.

New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority, of which NY Transit and Metro-North RR are subsidiaries, says about 60% of items turned in are returned to claimants.

Unclaimed items are donated to charities or sold at auction.

Dorothy of Oz slippers returned to Long Island RR rider

Long Island Rail Road's Lost & Found at Penn Station in New York City has returned to forgetful passengers items such as: a wedding dress, brass knuckles, a salad bowl, a wedding ring set, and a pair of Dorothy of Wizard of Oz fame slippers. The railroad's return rate is about 57%.

Unclaimed items mostly are junk, umbrellas, books, weapons and such.

Handbag lost and found three times

In June, a rider lost her handbag on a Ben Franklin Transit bus in Richland, Washington. As she exited the bus, she remembered to take a book she was reading, but forgot her purse. A bus employee found it and took it to a police station, where she retrieved it.

During the 4th of July weekend, she was in Portland, Oregon, with husband and college-age daughter. During check-in at their hotel, she left her handbag again, this time at the hotel check-in counter. Soon after, she realized it was missing, returned to the front desk, and retrieved it.

Later, she and her family rode the Portland light rail line to a waterfront event. Suddenly, she realized her handbag again was missing. Inside was \$140 in cash, credit cards, driver license, etc.

Next day the Richland Public Library called and said someone found it on a Portland bus, with her library card inside. She went to the library and claimed it. Inside were her driver license, gift cards, credit cards, etc. Only the cash was missing.

Closeness to bus/rail lines boosts home value 41%

Housing near public transport is worth more, indicates a study done for the National Association of Realtors. Five years worth of home sales in major metropolitan areas were analyzed by researchers. They found homes within a half-mile of public transportation were worth an average 41% more than properties that weren't.

“Transportation is important in real estate and housing decisions,” explained Lawrence Yun, NAR chief economist. “Shorter commutes and more walkable neighborhoods matter to a growing number of people, especially those living in congested metro areas.”

Value differences were especially pronounced in cities and suburbs known for public transportation access, such as New York City. On Manhattan's Upper East Side, for instance, apartment values drop by 15% to 20% for every block away from a subway line, said Ariel Dagan, realtor, Keller Williams Realty. However, even in communities lacking such a reputation, such as Phoenix, a pronounced housing value difference held true.

Home buyers like being near, but not too near, the study suggests. In Portland, Oregon, where residents rate convenience to a bus or/and light rail line a top priority, they prefer buses and trains not pass their front lawn or back yard, noted Rob Levy, a broker with Keller Williams Realty.

Also sponsoring the study was the American Public Transportation Association.

Suburban home gains \$7,500 by being near rail station

Living near a railway station adds an average \$7,900 in value to a suburban Philadelphia home, shows a study done for the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Association by Econsult Solutions Inc. The study analyzed 88,300 single-family home sales in four suburban counties during 2005-12. Price difference varied depending on closeness to a station and its car parking capacity, and train service frequency. The difference virtually disappeared where the property was three miles or more from the nearest station. The survey covered home sales in Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery counties.

SEPTA commissioned the study hoping its findings could help show legislators the value to the state of SEPTA Regional Rail's dozen commuter railroad lines. By increasing home values, these railroad lines directly increase real estate tax revenues and indirectly increase state income tax and sales tax collections. Thus, the study suggests, additional state financial aid should much more than pay for itself.

Paris seniors ride at half-fare, but not senior tourists

Many seniors in Paris, France, and vicinity, use an annual transit pass called The Carte Améthyste. It lets them ride at half fare, or even sometimes free, on all transit run by RATP, the regional public transport system, and SNCF, the national railway system. Available to seniors age 65&+, this pass can be gotten at age 60&+ under certain circumstances. Adults certified as 80% disabled also qualify.

RADP is the Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens, which translates into English as Autonomous Operator of Parisian Transports. Headquartered in Paris, its logo supposedly portrays the Paris area's portion of the Seine River as the face of an RADP rider.

RATP provides most public transport in Paris and its surrounding Île-de-France region, being boarded about 3-billion times annually. This includes: the Paris Metro, light rail, aka tram, and bus services, as well as some Réseau Express Regional (RER) transport.

Sorry, senior tourists can't get a Carte Améthyste pass. It's only for residents, who have lived in the Paris area for at least three of the past five years. Even they don't get it free. Price is €16, plus €10 to register it against loss, theft, etc.

Los Angeles plans to get rid of paper transfers

“Transfers have been an ongoing concern for several years,” says a Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority official. The MTA hopes to eliminate them within the next few years.

They are an all too frequent cause of friction between bus drivers and troublesome riders, as noted in page 7 of *The Travelin’ Grampa* last month. For example, the rider who recently spit on and then punched an L.A. MTA bus driver after being refused a free transfer. Transfer theft also continues to be an MTA concern. In L.A., thieves can sell for 50¢ a transfer good for a \$1.60 ride on an MTA bus. This also has been incentive for transfer counterfeiting.

Every workday MTA drivers hand out about 170,000 paper transfers, said spokesperson Ed Scannell. “Each operator gets more than he or she needs because we never know exactly how many riders will request them,” he said.

Transfers also consume a driver’s time, while being manually punched, handed out, etc.

Bus driver assaults decline after transfers disappear

Bus drivers in Orange County, Calif., seem very glad they no longer hand out and accept paper transfers. Transit police there say rider arguments with – and assaults on – bus drivers declined by about 85% since Orange County Transit Authority stopped using transfers last summer. In their place, OCTA introduced a cheap all-day pass.

Previously, drivers encountered numerous arguments as riders tried to use transfers that expired 15 minutes earlier, sometimes even weeks or months earlier. Other transfers they tried to pass-off were not good for travel in the direction they wished to go.



Illustrations: Arlington County; WMATA.

L to R: Farebox on an ART bus; Senior SmarTrip card; Arlington Transit bus, better known as an ART bus.

Senior SmarTrip fare card the way to go in DC area

In the Washington DC area, anyone age 65+ should have a *Senior SmarTrip* card. It's good not only on MetroRail and MetroBus lines, but also on most suburban public transit systems. For instance, in *Montgomery County* it lets the card holder ride free on *RideOn buses* and even some Metro buses Mon.-Fri. between 9:30 am and 3 pm and half fare otherwise. During free ride times, seniors don't tap their cards on the RideOn fare box, but merely show it to the bus driver.

A *Senior SmarTrip* card lets you ride for 85¢ on *CUE buses* in the city of *Fairfax*, in DC's Virginia suburbs. CUE stands for City-University-Energysaver. The CUE bus system is owned and operated by the City of Fairfax in conjunction with George Mason University. CUE provides low-cost transit within the city and to and from the Vienna/Fairfax-GMU MetroRail station and the GMU Fairfax campus. Its buses run seven days a week.

ART buses in *Arlington County*, also mostly DC suburbs, let SmarTrip users ride for 75¢.

Seniors age 60+ with or without a Senior SmarTrip card can ride *TheBus*, operated by *Prince Georges County*, in Maryland, for free during normal operational hours 6 am to 7 pm Mon.-Fri. Or, to ride free they can show their driver license or other official photo ID.

The Senior SmarTrip card even is good on *Baltimore* area buses, light rail and subway lines, although Maryland Transit Administration prefers riders use its *Senior Charmcard* fare card.

China airports encounter world's worst delays

If you fly to China, you'll probably arrive on time. Flights within China, however, tend to depart late. According to *FlightStats*, an air travel web site, China's airports suffer the world's worst delays. For instance, it notices only 18% of flights from Beijing were on-time lately.

Takeoffs probably were much worse. "Planes pull away from gates on-time without clearance to take off and remain on the tarmac for up to 30 minutes, just so the flight can say it was not delayed," reports *The Economist* magazine. Read avidly by *Grampa* and many business travelers, this weekly publication supposes about 30% of flights from China's big airports took-off on-time last year. Official statistics claim 75% did.

"The good news is that almost all planes take off and land in China safely," it says, quoting aircraft maker Boeing as boasting that China's accident rate lately is "half that of America."

Airline fare-drop refunds rarely applied-for

Grampa generally buys airline tickets pretty far in advance, to get a good price. Sometimes, the airline's price for that identical flight will drop below what he paid. Some airlines, such as Southwest, will refund the difference, if you ask for it. AirTran, Alaska and Jet Blue have similar fare-drop refund policies.

♪ Ten little, ♪ six little, ♪ even fewer little airlines... ♪

Back in October, *Grampa* lauded federal antitrust lawyers for opposing a US Airways - American Airlines merger. Alas, only weeks after saying this could cost airline passengers hundreds of millions of dollars, the U.S. Justice Department okayed the merger. To mollify the so-called trustbusters, American agreed to turn over prime departure/arrival gates at several key airports to smaller competitors, such as Southwest, JetBlue and Virgin America. American agreed to give up enough gates at Washington DC's National Airport (DCA) to cut about 44 of its flights daily from there, theoretically letting competitors add a similar number of DCA departures. American promised to do likewise at: Boston Logan International, Chicago's O'Hare, Dallas Love Field, Los Angeles (LAX), Miami International and New York's LaGuardia.

Attorney General claims mega-merger boosts competition

U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder tried to put a positive spin on the American-US Airways mega-merger. "By guaranteeing a bigger foothold for low-cost carriers at key U.S. airports, this settlement ensures airline passengers will see more competition on nonstop and connecting routes throughout the country," he said.

70% of USA airline passengers board at 29 airports

About 70% of domestic airline passengers board at 29, or 6.3%, of the USA's airports, says William S. Swelbar of the MIT International Center for Air Transportation. "Most fares will go up in those markets where US Air eliminates a multi-stop route that competes with American," predicts Vaughn Cordle of Airline Forecasts. However, if the merger results in airlines boosting profits by gaining more passengers per plane, he feels it could have "a positive effect on fares."