

NEW YORK

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES

The Subway as City: An Underground Overview

By Jim Sleeper
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New York would not have its riot of tall buildings or a street life so spectacularly vibrant, gritty and dense without its subways. Their labyrinthian complexity rivals the human circulatory and nervous systems—a profusion of arteries and synapses working 'round the clock, twitching even the little toes of the city that never sleeps.

Taking the subway doesn't keep you from "seeing" the city; the subway *is* the city in motion. Combined with as much walking as you can manage above ground, the subway is by far the best exposure to New York's multilayered density—which, after all, is what the intrepid traveler comes here to savor.

Not counting buses or commuter rails, New York's subways alone move 3.7 million people a day on 7,043 trains traveling through 463 stations across 230 miles of tracks. More than 23,000 people run the New York City system, including 6,500 train operators and conductors, 3,800 token sellers and 11,500 maintenance workers—a city within a city.

But who cares? The thundering, rolling democracy of the trains, whose ridership is up this year in the face of every disincentive and decay, owes its resiliency in part, of course, to such prosaic factors as recent, marginal improvements in running times, safety and cleanliness; the deluge of poor immigrants; the increasingly hopeless

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BY FRED SWEETS—THE WASHINGTON POST

SUBWAYS, From E4

fear of ending one's days impoverished, homeless, wandering the subways, dragging shopping bags stuffed with pamphlets, ranting about socialism. To descend into the subway one needs not a bodyguard but a Virgil, a guide to its unexpected freedoms and illicit pleasures.

Where to begin, then? Not, please, if you can help it, at the Port Authority Bus Terminal or Penn Station, where the system is at its ghastliest. If you're coming by Amtrak from the south, get off at Newark, N.J., and make an across-the-platform transfer to the Port Authority Trans Hudson (PATH) trains, all of which make an 18-minute, \$1 trip to the World Trade Center at Manhattan's southern tip, within easy walking distance of Wall Street, City Hall, the South Street Seaport and Battery Park (and the ferries to Staten Island and the Statue of Liberty), and Chinatown and Little Italy.

The Trade Center's underground concourse is attractive and clean, and if the day is clear, what better way to begin your visit to the city than go up top for a view. When you're ready, five subway lines depart from the Trade Center concourse, itself, and another three from within two blocks of it—though if you're free of luggage, you'll want to walk to one of the neighborhoods mentioned above and catch the subway from there.

If you're coming from JFK Airport, by all means take the "Train to the Plane" (in this case, from the plane), which is a special subway train accessible by shuttle bus from all terminals. It costs \$6.50, takes an hour to midtown Manhattan and deposits you at any of six convenient transfer points within the subway system it-

self. Or you can save \$5.50 and ride the A Train itself from the same JFK Airport station (which happens to be labeled Howard Beach, after the neighborhood it also serves).

But best of all is taking the subway from close to La Guardia Airport, the arrival point for the Eastern and Pan Am shuttles. Take a 2½-mile, \$6 to \$7 cab ride to the Roosevelt Avenue/Jackson Heights station in the center of burgeoning immigrant Queens, and board the spotlessly clean, efficient, elevated No. 7 IRT train to Manhattan. If possible, stand by the front window of the first car and watch the great skyline swing into view, especially as the train makes its spectacular, winding final approach to the tunnel under the East River to Grand Central Station and Times Square, where you may transfer to virtually any other line you need.

The No. 7 is a wonderful introduction to New York's mindboggling diversity. Stolid, mustachioed Greek workers, Korean mothers and infants, Chinese students laughing together or poring over textbooks, South American messengers and more crowd the trains. It is all a strange mixture of alien babble and immigrant silence, so different from that curious holding of breath on the Lexington Avenue trains—or, for that matter, the Washington Metro—at rush hours.

Beneath the apparent anonymity and anomie of the surging multitudes in New York, most people are pretty regular in their habits, taking the same train each day at the same moment, sitting in the car that will stop closest to wherever the exit is in their particular station. Neighbors and friends do meet with enough consistency to establish a family feeling in some of the cars. If you have

time, get off and follow some of the passengers into their neighborhoods—get a cup of coffee in the little "village" centers of still-predominantly Irish Woodside, for example, before moving on into Manhattan; or board the No. 7 going east instead of west, and see how Asians have transformed downtown Flushing, a vibrant Queens neighborhood labeled "Main Street" at the end of the line.

If you've ridden a No. 7 train into Manhattan after a La Guardia arrival, get out at Grand Central, enjoy the main concourse, and then board the escalators to the north and find your way through the Pan Am and Helmsley buildings and up sleek Park Avenue to 53rd Street, where, a couple blocks to the west at the Fifth Avenue station, you can catch the E train down to the World Trade Center. Or, coming from Newark and the PATH train, take the same E train north and east to the Fifth Avenue station, walk east to Park, and then down to Grand Central for the No. 7 out to Flushing.

You cannot really be an intruder on a New York City subway train. You can sit there, writing on a small spiral pad against the rocking of the train, by turns oblivious and observant, free like the others to read or scribble, look or fantasize, draw connections, study faces, contribute to the community of eyes or withdraw from it, yet always present to others doing the same.

"Jee-sus is coming soooon! Hee ees knock-eeng at the do-o-or ohf yor ha-ar-art!" The elderly black West Indian preacher is blind, his clerical suit shiny and frayed. He stands by a door with his back to most of the crowd, staring intently up through the ceiling at the only Light he can see, palming no literature, begging

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SUBWAYS, From E5

no alms.

Every such interruption summons new worlds of association, tapping every rider's pool of memory and aspiration, calling up a repertoire of civilities and survival skills. This is no sidewalk spectacle seen from the security of a passing car, but an encounter in shared public space where speech is untrammelled and intrusive and you, too, are at stake, and every real or symbolic affront to civil order needs to be negotiated with some corresponding affirmation or defense or subtler shift of demeanor.

Frizzy-haired white youths from The New Alliance Party of the Upper West Side burst through the car like characters out of Central Casting, distributing their newspaper. An approach to the masses going back to Lenin: revolution by newspaper readers, in the subways, no less—an anachronism, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. Tall black Muslims in white robes and caps from a settlement in ravaged Bushwick are impeccable, elaborately polite: "Ladies and gentlemen, please pardon this untimely intrusion . . ." and give the address of their "school for the children," inviting all to visit, as they pass their cups for coins.

There are the saxophone and kettle drum players on the platforms, and the young white minstrels and fiddlers from the heartland; and there is Ramon Garcia of the Bronx, a man without legs, whose torso glides down the aisle at shin-level on a tiny skateboard just after the morning rush hour, when there's room to pass with his tin cup. There are the de-ranked-looking young men down on their luck: "I'm not out mugging anyone, ladies and gentlemen, but my wife is in the hospital and our benefits were cut off . . ." You teeter between skepticism and compassion.

We are not talking about any other subway system in the world, even by analogy. Tokyo's carries more people, though on far fewer route miles and not 'round the clock; but the real difference is that its passengers are all Japanese, fantastically homogeneous by the standards of New York, city of a thousand ethnic rush hours, where the B West End line dispatch-

es dozens of extra trains out of Manhattan early each winter Friday afternoon and Jewish holiday eve to get the orthodox home to Borough Park in time for sundown.

More than 25 percent of New York City's residents are foreign-born, and if you think of the city as a great human heart, drawing into itself a hundred immigrant bloodstreams and pumping them back out again bearing new Americans, then the subway is both metaphor and actual embodiment of that process, an agent of the transformation. To see it, you have to stand on the East Side Lexington trains not only when they're jammed with pin-striped Wall Street commuters at rush hours, but also at "the other rush hour" at 2 a.m., when predominantly black and Hispanic Bronx-bound workers come off their office-cleaning and post office jobs all along the line.

At that same hour on weekends, the West Side IRT is a rocketing zoo, hitting 55 mph on its way north from the western fringes of SoHo and Greenwich Village through Penn Station, Times Square, the glitzy bars and restaurants of the still-yuppifying Upper West Side, the teeming street life of upper Broadway in West Harlem and Washington Heights, and on into affluent Riverdale in the Bronx.

The New York subway's difference from those of other American cities isn't just in population diversity, but also in sheer density. Even though Atlanta's population is almost a quarter of New York's, its MARTA system carries only 180,000 passengers a day on what is essentially a suburban-to-central-city commuter system. Miami's Metrorail moves 33,000 a day—which is about three-quarters of what New York carries between 1 and 4 a.m. on a quiet weeknight. Washington's Metro is rapidly approaching half a million passengers a day, but the configuration of both the District and the Metro itself make it as much a commuter system as a real city subway.

Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago and perhaps Washington approach, at some spots and moments, the kind of density that might sustain a real subway culture, with its walkers and readers-in-transit, even at off hours. But only New York is . . . well, New York, where Velma Newton, the di-

minutive supervisor of the IRT No. 7 line—which carries 250,000 passengers a day on 32 eleven-car trains, spaced two minutes apart at rush hour, between Queens and Manhattan—found herself helping shovel 4,000 pounds of Shea Stadium sod left on her sparkling russet and cream-colored cars by delirious Mets fans who'd ripped up the field after the 1986 division playoffs.

Newton thanked her crews by baking 300 pieces of chicken at home in Bedford-Stuyvesant that weekend and having it dropped off in buckets up and down the line at lunch hour on Monday. But then, for Newton, the subway is family: her mother, brother and father-in-law work for the Transit Authority, too.

New York is a subway city in another way that tourists seldom see, but should. At 191st Street in Washington Heights, near Manhattan's northern tip, passengers emerge to a station facing the Tudor-style Hudson View Gardens complex, across a little park with outcroppings of rock where people sit comfortably on warm evenings.

Twenty miles to the south, in Brooklyn's brownstone Carroll Gardens (the setting for much of the movie "Moonstruck"), passengers come out of the F and G trains' Carroll Street stop to a similar neighborhood peace—young couples sitting in a small local park, old men playing bocci, kids shooting baskets by the light of a streetlamp after dark.

If the people who lived in these and countless other New York neighborhoods all had to come home in cars every evening instead of walking from the station, as most do, greeting their neighbors and shopkeepers and newsstand dealers along the way, the social and architectural density of these quiet homes, courtyards and parks would be overwhelmed by wider roads, driveways, parking lots—destruction by the automobile of a built environment unique in its charm. This, too, as much as the midtown skyscrapers and jammed sidewalks of Manhattan, is part of the meaning of the subway to the life of the city.

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