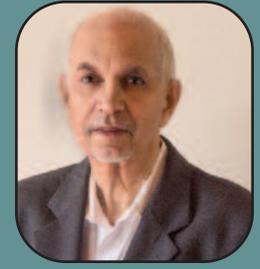


Survival and Prosperity

by Ned Einstein



Survival and Prosperity Part 2: The Magic Coach

In Part 1 of this series titled Magic Corridors (see <https://transalt.com/article/survival-and-prosperity-part-1-magic-corridors/>), I outlined a strategy by which the motorcoach industry could explode into moderate-length corridors otherwise dominated by commercial airlines. Arithmetically, this strategy would seem impossible to fail. Part of the ability to realize this expansion, and offer a wildly-beneficial alternative, lies in the adaptation of the coach deployed in such a service.

The paragraphs below will outline the characteristics these vehicles will need. It will summarize both a rationale and perspective for the modifications suggested. (Part 3 in this series will expand on these points.) Most interesting is that few of the modifications needed would be those referred to, in the bus manufacturing industry, as “engineering changes” – which can be complex and costly. The vast lion’s share lie above the floor.

All but one major commercial airline offer first-class seating.

Privacy, Luxury and Class

Other than on tiny “puddle jumpers,” all but one major commercial airline (Southwest Airlines) offer first-class seating. Most offer “business class” seats as well. Those who do not travel by train may not know that many trains among our passenger rail monopoly offer not only “quiet cars” and first class compartments, but both tiny sleeping compartments and small-bedroom-sized sleeping compartments which span all but about 30 inches of the train car’s width. Those who do not travel abroad are likely unaware that many country’s subways (e.g., the Paris Metro) have first-class cars. I imagine buses and motorcoaches in many countries do as well. The fares are higher, but everyone gets a seat. The “well-heeled” crowd (likely wearing running shoes today) share their car with mostly fellow well-heeled riders. Such a feature would be particularly desirable – and sellable – in the Age of COVID – especially

for both the most vulnerable as well as the anti-vaxxers (a subpopulation which overlaps considerably).

No domestic motorcoach on which I have ever ridden contains such a choice. Why not? This feature may not seem so critical in terms of comfort, as all motorcoach seats bear a close resemblance to business class airline seats: Wide, plush seats, with individual lighting and A/C controls, Wi-Fi and often fold-down trays. Not extra legroom, and not better service. Why not? After all, even coast-to-coast commercial airlines stopped serving meals years ago – except to first-class customers on a few, highly-selective flights. How hard would it really be to compete with this abstinence on a 45-foot, 8½-foot wide motorcoach with only four seats across the entire width of the coach?

The competitive motorcoach should have a first-class section.

The competitive motorcoach should have a first-class section. With far more legroom, four rows of luxurious stretch-out seats would consume the space of five regular rows. Four seats lost – oh, well. Otherwise, a curtain (or better yet a sound-proof door and shield behind the last of these seats) could separate the two sections.

Comfort and Convenience

The obvious amenities would cost a pittance: Blankets, pillows, TV screens (presenting movies, TV and music), headphones and footrests. With any imagination, and some clever engineering, seatbacks could fully recline throughout the coach. (The increased legroom in the first-class section could accommodate padded, raised leg rests, even in seating position.) Along with open overhead luggage racks, one could have a drawer. A small slice of space in both first class and “coach” could serve as a closet. Next day’s clothing could end up wrinkle free when slipped on in one of the now-two, slightly-larger restrooms. (Oops, two more seats gone.) These restrooms could contain some amenities beyond toilet paper – like real towels.

Since it would make imminent sense for the Magic Coach to have an attendant on board, the used towels could be placed in a bin and replaced with clean, fresh ones. (The used ones could drop into a container in one of the luggage bays; fresh ones could be stored below the floor and retrieved by the attendant in batches during rest stops.) Passengers needing them could be given toothbrushes, toothpaste, dental floss, anti-bacterial fluids and other lotions.

With revamped seating designed to accommodate full reclining (I am not giving this approach away; I design buses for a living), new possibilities for storage also emerge – much of it beneath the seats. One could also bring aboard one’s own food and drink. There would be no need to cook or mix anything. Particularly since the Age of COVID began, many of the world’s best gourmet restaurants offer large menus “to go.” The coach would simply have them delivered to a single collection point along the way. (Savvy passengers can order and pay for them through apps on their phones.) The attendant would simply warm these nuptials up. The coach would need no galley, no stoves, no pots, no pans and no utensils. It would only need a few microwaves, a couple small refrigerators and an ice-maker. Oops! There go two more seats; now we have lost eight.)

How much more could metal silverware and cloth napkins cost? Or real dishes? Oops! Now we would need a dishwasher. A ninth seat gone – drats. Like washcloths and towels, napkins, sheets, blankets and pillow cases could be cleaned and replaced at storage yards or bus terminals. A second restroom will replace the 10th seat. Finding room to make both restrooms slightly larger should be easy.

Accessibility and Flexibility

In numerous ways – not just accommodating wheelchair users – coaches with vestibules make enormous sense for shaping into the ultimate coach for this duty cycle, and helping it to run more efficiently, more realistically and more safely – apart from the advantages its extra stepwell would add to multiple logistics, not to mention faster boarding and alighting, much less faster emergency evacuation. I have touched upon a myriad of benefits of this approach in former articles of NATIONAL BUS TRADER (see <https://transalt.com/article/a-para->

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MCI hardly has a patent on the concept of its model MCI D4500 CRT LE. Any OEM can complete the potential of this brilliant starting point. More creative applications only expand the possibilities for this concept's versatility. If we took advantage of this concept, we would lose two more seats: Now 12 lost – darn! In exchange, of course, we would have far more flexibility for storage. Such flexibility dwarfs its accessibility advantages.

Rocking in the Cradle

Plenty of motorcoach passengers already take “overnighters” to eliminate the cost of a night or two in a hotel or motel. They sleep, uncomfortably, sitting up. Their next day's clothing is wrinkled. They can only swab their underarms. All this will change with fully-reclining seats, good bedding, larger restrooms and two showers. (Oops! There go two more seats; now we have lost 14.) Otherwise, with some emulsifiers or filters to eliminate the soapy water, the drainage from the showers could circulate through the coach's cooling system – much as the engine's super-heated alcohol flows through the passenger and driver compartments' heating system.

By the way, most of these amenities would be positioned on the aisle side – maximizing privacy and allowing more passengers the luxury of a window seat. Otherwise, the showers could be steam showers – requiring far less water, and easier high-pressure pumping from small water tanks below the floor – lowering the coach's center-of-gravity in the process, and making the ride even smoother and safer.

It takes no effort to get used to luxury.

For those unfamiliar with sleeper cars, the lateral “roll” operates like a cradle, actually rocking one to sleep. During my early 1980s stint as a piano player on AMTRAK's Montrealer, with my tiny sleeper car, I had more trouble falling asleep on off nights, in my apartment's regular, stationary bed. It takes no effort to get used to luxury.

While our 57-passenger business class coach has now become a luxury 43-bed hotel-on-wheels, these 43 seat-beds would cost a tiny fraction of even the cheapest 43 motel rooms. Plus, beyond the effortless-ness of warming up great meals, there would be no end to great snacks and plenty of room to store an ample variety to choose from if and when one wanted to slurp or nibble. For those less picky small spenders, every town on the route also has a great pizza parlor and a range of fast food joints. Of course, one could obtain fast food in any airline concourse – if one does not mind paying triple for it, wait in line and either eat it immediately or when it gets cold. (Just dare ask your flight attendant to reheat your chili dog.) On airlines, one may not bring aboard any liquids not purchased in the concourse – including soup, wine and many others. If you did not wish your Magic Coach to pick up and store it for you, you could always drag-along your carry-on solid food. With the choices noted, who would do this?

Finally, it would be unreasonable (and unsafe during certain segments that the driver could easily identify) for our attendant to remain standing during the entire ride. That leaves our passengers with only 42.

Addition, Subtraction and Common Sense

Especially since even the richest, snobbiest passengers could travel in first class on the Magic Coach, I have troubling identifying the benefits of a moderate-length commercial airline flight. This is particularly true for those who choose to skip the hotel or motel and its costs and hassles. Even for those who do not (and who might simply prefer a far-more-comfortable daytime trip, where he or she could relax or get work done, in luxury), the pluses for air travel are hard to find.

The Magic Coach would travel from city center to city center, passing through other city centers along the way – and avoiding those long two-way commutes often compounded by airport parking (unless one enjoys urban and freeway-to-airport traffic). Taxi and limousine rides are much-preferred, although they usually cost exponentially more than the trip to and from a bus depot or Magic Coach parking spot in the center of the city.

Not only is food possible on the Magic Coach, but great food is possible – and effortless. No food is possible on commercial airlines, other than for first-class passengers on an increasingly limited number of even coast-to-coast flights. On moderate-distance flights, one's meal is a small package of Cheetos or Oreos (although I like the animal crackers).

With the Magic Coach properly configured, one's seat could fully recline – even in “coach.” One can do this on long flights – but only on Philippine Airlines. Oops! America does not allow foreign-owned airlines to provide domestic service. Sorry. One can hang up clothing, in the first-class section, on a limited number of domestic flights, but one cannot do this in “coach.” With a properly-configured Magic Coach, this would be available in both sections.

The Magic Coach's two restrooms could be significant larger than those of a commercial airplane. One cannot take a shower on any airplane (other than perhaps Air Force One, and other large private planes). The Magic Coach would contain two. The first-class legroom of the Magic Coach would be comparable to the legroom in the first-class section of a commercial airplane. The “coach” legroom would be greater even without the changes that might sacrifice four more seats. Needless to say, the Magic Coach's coach-class seats would be comparable to those of a commercial airplane's business class seats.

One would obviously not experience turbulence, or be forced to wear a seat belt during the first and last 20-minute segments of the trip. In fact, during many portions of the trip, the Magic Coach's pneumatic suspension system would provide a smoother ride than much of an airplane trip. To be fair, the likelihood of either mode crashing is comparable, and luckily, rare. Of course, Magic Coach crashes result mostly in major or minor injuries. No one survives an airline crash.

To be fair, more terrorist attacks occur on buses, throughout the world, than on passenger aircraft. Yet none have yet happened on a bus or coach of any kind in the U.S. Otherwise, there is no upside to the security lines, X-ray bins, shoe-and-belt removal rituals endemic to a flight of any length. While I understand and accept the need for it, I am not fond of having the inside of my thighs and my genitals patted down, even while I am allowed to keep my clothes on.

Since no food is served on board, and lines are typically long for any concourse restaurant, I resent paying triple for the lousy food I can even obtain in an airport concourse.

Even eschewing trip reservations – which savvy Magic Coach providers would accommodate with live Earthlings answering the telephone (as well as by coherent Web sites that actually work) – one could travel by Magic Coach without a reservation. He or she would just have to find one with an available seat – a curiosity that could be con-

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Savvy Magic Coach providers would accommodate with live Earthlings answering the telephone.

firmed with a simple phone call or quick cell-phone inquiry. One would have to sacrifice the swell hold music accompanying those multi-hour sessions-on-hold in which, to be fair, most callers have earned to multi-task through. One might miss the challenges of online air reservation puzzles, replete with credit card entries, passwords and other joys of modern communications which would be unnecessary for Magic Coach travel, on which passengers could even pay cash upon boarding. (Try that trick on a commercial airline.)

For the conservation-conscious, most motorcoaches of all types produced by 2030 will be battery-powered. With the enormous energy needed to defy gravity, such savings in energy and pollution would be inconceivable for commercial airline travel. Since most medium-distance Magic Coach trips would encompass one or two rest stops, batteries could be recharged at the charging stations already proliferating. If not, and especially with the convenience and ease of gourmet food and more restrooms, the Magic Coach could ignore such stops altogether. This would likely translate into larger batteries – and perhaps the loss of four more seats (to offset the weight of a larger battery), and fares would increase by 10 percent as seating capacity shrunk from 42 to 38 seats.

Finally, ignoring all the inconvenience of medium-distance airline travel, the difference in fares would be substantial and dramatic. A current medium-distance motorcoach trip costs a fraction as much as the same trip by commercial airplane. If we ever live through the Age of COVID, airline fares will once again escalate to the point where the same trip by motorcoach would cost even less. Of course, fares would understandably increase to travel by the Magic Coach – since the former 57-passenger coach would now have only 42 (or 38) seats. Further, if first-class fares were a tad higher, they would subsidize coach-class fares, and these latter would not need to be increased at all. Even if they did, how much higher would they need to be to amortize the cost of features that would not greatly increase the cost of either the vehicle or its operation (most of which would be the cost of the attendant)?

Fairness and Perspective

In the grand scheme of things, the commercial airline industry has been, and still is, a blessing. And a wonder. One can travel from coast to coast in half a day – including the connections at each end, and all the airline-induced hardships, risks, inconveniences and corruption along the way. For three years, I commuted effortlessly between Los Angeles, Paris and Maribor (see “The Nature of Modern Travel” in NATIONAL BUS TRADER, September, 2019, at <https://transalt.com/article/drivers-v-robots-part-2-the-nature-of-modern-travel/>). Commercial air travel made those years of my life possible. For all those things, I am grateful.

However, wonders can be grossly overextended. Like many great things, greed and apathy have crushed the notion of competition that once formed the rationale for the notion of free enterprise. Overextended with impunity, airline travel today means commuting from the center city or suburb to some outlying airport, arriving 90 minutes early, passing through understaffed security lines, regularly having the inside of your thighs and genitals rubbed, having your flight delayed or cancelled, struggling for hours through broken Web sites or on hold in telephone calls to obtain a reservation, being transferred to flights you never agreed to so that corporate crooks can deploy only aircraft completely full (much less in the heart of COVID-19), and occasionally being stranded overnight and forced to constantly cruise airport corridors the following day as you are bounced from one stand-by rejection to another (see <https://transalt.com/article/expanding-the-mode-split-dividing-line-part-1-exponential-airline-industry-corruption/>). As we have few other choices (Southwest Airlines excepted) for long trips, the good outweighs the bad.

These hardships and corruption do not remotely outweigh the bad for a 300-mile flight. Apart from other extraordinary benefits of Magic Coach travel, they hardly outweigh the bad of a 700-mile flight. With the vehicle enhancements noted, most air travelers would be foolish (much less gouged and cheated, with considerable time and cost squandered) to travel such distances by commercial airline – where and when such options are even available.

Of course, to be successful, the new Magic Coach sector would not need to mode split more than a tiny fraction of current commercial airline travelers. (They could easily make up for these tiny losses by consolidating a few more flights.)

Unlike my feelings about TNCs, I have no desire to wipe out or disrupt the airline

After all, service does not exist – or should not exist – for the benefit of the servers.

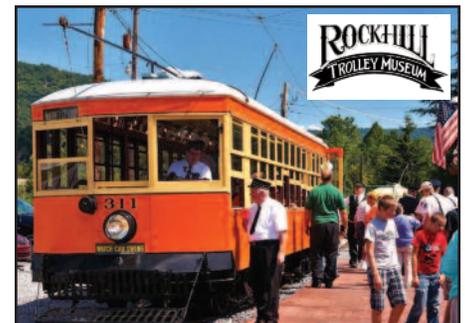
industry. I would simply like to see something far superior replace it in certain types of service areas – mainly smaller ones. After all, service does not exist – or should not exist – for the benefit of the servers. It exists, or should exist, for the benefit of those served. Customer service had always been the lynchpin of the motorcoach industry. More and more lately, the lynchpin of commercial airline service has been exploitation.

My hope is that these thoughts are provocative. If NATIONAL BUS TRADER readers – and their family, friends, colleagues and social media contacts – feel likewise, perhaps something can be done about it. Like a reasonable expression of interest – particularly among motorcoach operators.

Otherwise, as the old song goes: I’m not trying to set the world on fire. I just want to burn a hole in your heart.

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