

\$3.50 for Louisville to Chicago

Megabus fares can be a steal, but there also are trade-offs

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The fields of southern Indiana are rolling by, and from my front seat on the upper level of a double-decker bus, I have a panoramic view of a blue, cloud-dappled sky and the traffic moving north alongside me on Interstate Highway 65. I should be working, using the free Wi-Fi on board, or reading the book I must finish before book group next week. But I feel content just gazing out the window.

I'm also feeling a bit smug. For this trip between Louisville, Ky., and Chicago, I paid Megabus just \$3.50. That's not a typo. My fare was \$3, the booking fee 50 cents. Driving would have cost more given the current gas prices and would take about the same time. Flying would have cost much more but would have been faster, though I'd have to figure in the wait time at the airport before a flight and in baggage claim after.

The business plan for Megabus, which started in the United Kingdom in 2003 and in the U.S. in 2006 as a subsidiary of Coach USA, uses a yield-management model, basically the same kind of pricing strategy used in airline or rail service.

The difference is in the super-low fares. The lowest fares, including a few at just \$1, are for reservations booked the furthest in advance. Weekend departures are higher than weekdays. My \$3 fare, booked eight weeks in advance for a Tuesday departure, would have been \$30 if I had left the previous Sunday.

So what's the catch?

Megabus has advantages, chief among them price, but it has some pitfalls too. It's not for everyone, though my fellow passengers seem to represent a good cross section of the traveling public. Yes, there are the 20-something backpacker types but a few families too, and several passengers were at or near Medicare age.

The bad news: Buses usually don't stop at stations but pull up to a curb marked by a small sign with the Megabus logo. If the weather is bad, you stand there or seek shelter wherever you can



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find it: an awning, a coffee shop. Don't stray too far, though. Miss the bus and you're out of luck. No refunds.

Passengers must arrive 15 minutes before scheduled departure, but buses can run late. I've heard tales of delays of an hour or more. There are no agents to inform you, though you can download a tracking app to your smartphone. Major service problems are posted on megabus.com.

The times of departure aren't always convenient. From Louisville to Chicago I had two choices: 4 p.m. or 4 a.m. Standing on a dark street corner in downtown Louisville at 4 in the morning didn't sound like a good idea.

Bus stops may be near public transportation, though. In Chi-

cago, for example, Megabus pulls up on Canal Street half a block south of Union Station, about three from Ogilvie Transportation Center, making it easy to connect with Metra.

Much has been written about accidents involving Megabus: a fatal crash near Litchfield, Ill., in 2012, pedestrians struck in Chicago in 2010 and 2012. But I wonder how many auto accidents happened on the days of those incidents. As with the airlines, when buses are involved in accidents, they make the news; everyday car crashes often don't.

Chicago is a hub for Megabus, with direct service to about 30 cities, including Grand Rapids, Ann Arbor and Detroit in Michigan; Milwaukee and Madison in Wisconsin; Iowa City and Des

Moines in Iowa; Minneapolis; St. Louis and Kansas City in Missouri; Cleveland, Cincinnati, Toledo and Columbus in Ohio; and Memphis and Nashville in Tennessee.

Because Megabus is an express city-to-city bus service, there are few stops between Point A and Point B. We left Louisville right on time, stopped in downtown Indianapolis and parked at an I-65 truck stop for a 30-minute restroom and meal break. The total trip took 6 hours; I've driven it in 5½.

Don't count on bringing a load of luggage. One 50-pound suitcase with a combined measurement of 62 inches (width plus height plus length) is all you're allowed to check. Any bag you bring on board must fit under your seat. Overhead storage is either tiny or nonexistent, depending on seats, which are unassigned. That roll-aboard you take on an airplane won't make it; it will count as your one checked item.

Considering the cheap fares

and no-frills approach, I figured the experience on board would be grim. Actually, I was quite comfortable. The seats were plush, reclined and had seat belts. Each had an electrical outlet. The free Wi-Fi worked, though it was spotty at times. There was a restroom in the rear of the lower level. The bus was fairly clean — a few food crumbs here and there.

As passengers board, drivers check off online reservation numbers; there are no tickets, and you can't pay on board. My driver had a bit of an attitude, a cross between a humorous Southwest Airlines flight attendant and a surly TSA agent, chastising passengers whose bags were heavy or who couldn't find their reservation number quickly. As we pulled away from the curb, he welcomed us on board but laid down the law: "no smokin', no drinkin'."

I'll say it again: I paid \$3.50! Reservations at megabus.com, or phone 877-462-6342.

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