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TRAVEL

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The start of something big

From a half-dozen of our seasoned sojourners, six tales of first times

There's a first time for everything, as the indisputable saying goes — and travel is no different. Who can forget their first glimpse of the Grand Canyon? Their first espresso at a Paris cafe? Their first time standing haplessly at the baggage carousel as their suitcase fails to appear? (Okay, scratch that last one.) For this collection, we bring together a half-dozen travel firsts. Some of our contributors were newbies through disinclination, others from simple lack of opportunity — and all own up to a certain level of trepidation. But whether it's traveling by bus or seeing that flying chandelier up close, trying new things can change your perspective. And isn't that what travel is all about? **STORIES, F4-F5**

Riding like a dream from station to station

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

When you're a child prone to carsickness, the wheels on the bus going round and round are nothing to sing about. On field trips, I sat at the front of the bus with my teachers while the cool kids sat in back joking or jamming to a Walkman.

Over the years, my aversion to bus travel only grew. Headlines reminded me that buses occasionally careen off cliffs, cross medians or catch fire. As an adult, I have managed to avoid intercity buses. In addition to a fear that heavy braking, curvy roads and stale air will unsettle my equilibrium for days (I never grew out of my susceptibility to motion sickness), I worry that I'll have an unbearable seatmate, run out of snacks or feel trapped when I need to stretch my back. I imagine buses delayed by hours, stuck on the side of the road or stalled in traffic.

Of course, it's easy to steer clear of buses when you love being in the driver's seat. I road-trip through time zones like some people binge on Netflix — I can't get enough. I like to leave before sunrise, stop on a whim, play loud music, drive in silence, pull over when I'm hungry and reroute when I hit traffic. Plus, I pack the car with things that don't board buses — my bike, paddleboard and beagle.

When Chinatown buses rolled out in the 1990s, leading the wave of discount bus lines, their low prices tempted me. But I've still opted for the eco-unfriendly car or the wallet-unfriendly train and never regretted my decisions. I'm not alone. A friend who travels often told me that she would sooner poke her eyes out with knitting needles than take the bus.

Then, last month, I needed to travel from San Antonio to Austin for a flight. I asked my Austinite friend Chris, one of the coolest kids I know, about transportation between the cities. It's a no-brainer, he said. Take the bus!

Just like that, I shelved my fears and booked a trip on Megabus.com. The 90-minute leg was just \$5 (!) so for another dollar, I splurged on a reserved seat and table up front.

In San Antonio, I rolled my suitcase a half-mile through downtown to an empty parking lot at Fourth Street and Broadway. The blue double-decker bus arrived slightly before our scheduled 5:30 p.m. departure. A dozen people, most of them young, lined up by the back of the bus like they knew the drill. We left our luggage on the pavement with the driver, trusting that it would end up in the cargo compartment.

I took my seat. A young man sat across the table from me, and we each had empty spots next to us. A woman and two kids sat across the aisle, and I looked longingly at their bag of road-trip snacks.

As our driver inched the bus out of the parking lot, he welcomed us and mentioned the restroom in the back. If you talk on the phone, he said, please use whisper voices. My tablemate made a quiet call and began watching a movie on his phone. There was a time, I'm told, when one could expect to meet fellow passengers on a bus — wanderers, tourists, romantics. I looked around and saw video on demand.

We merged onto Interstate 35 going north, and after returning a few texts, I relaxed my gaze out the window. The central Texas landscape isn't my favorite, but it was refreshing to stare aimlessly at the horizon with nary a thought of speedometers or gas gauges. I recognized names of small towns I'd once visited and daydreamed about a long-ago Texas romance.

We passed Cowboy Harley-Davidson of Austin, just outside the city, and I texted my friend Chris our ETA. We hit some traffic but still arrived ahead of schedule, a few blocks from the capitol dome.

I stood up from my comfortable seat and stretched. Yee-haw! My blessedly uneventful ride was over. The bus hadn't flipped or ignited, I hadn't turned green, and by the time I had exited at the rear, my luggage was on the pavement. I casually grabbed my bag, waited for Chris to pull up to the curb and hopped in his car. Like I knew the drill.

travel@washpost.com

Kaplan is a freelance writer based in the District. Her website is melaniedgkaplan.com. Find her on Twitter: @MelanieDGKaplan.

