

by Jo-Anne Nina Sewlal

Public transportation is public transportation no matter what country you visit? Well, it isn't when it comes to the Caribbean. Here it can be an inexpensive magic carpet ride to the sights and insights of island life.

Why take public transportation? For one thing, it is relatively cheap, and if you are on a tight budget this is a plus. It is also a way of taking a self-guided tour of a small island. In Grenada or Barbados, for example, one can use public transportation in the form of buses to get around the entire island. Aboard a bus, you are also immersed in the culture of the island and hear the views of the people on everyday life and general and political issues, rather than what you may read in the national newspapers. You can travel like a local on almost any island you visit.

On most of the islands of the Eastern Caribbean, vehicles designated as public transport are indicated by the first letter in their license plate, which is either an "H" or a "T". H represents Hire and T is for Taxi. However, this rule does not apply to Trinidad, where "T" indicates vehicles used to transport materials. Generally those designated "H" cater more for the general public and are cheaper, while the "T"s are more expensive and cater for tourists. They are more expensive since you are paying to hire the entire vehicle, while on the "H" vehicles you pay for a seat. In Trinidad and Tobago there are also "PH" vehicles, which are privately owned but are often used by the drivers to provide a taxi service. The drawback to choosing this option is that you are not sure they really know the route or whether they might even have criminal intentions. Also you are not insured in the event you are in an accident while travelling in a privately owned vehicle rather than a licensed taxi.

I said that in "almost" all of the islands you could use public transportation; this is because in Anguilla there is no public transportation, as almost all households own a vehicle. But there are "H" vehicles that cater for visitors.

A variety of vehicles are used to provide taxi or bus services in the Caribbean: cars, jeeps, mini-mokes, pick-up trucks and SUVs, with the most common being mini-buses, which are small vans installed with rows of seats holding up to 12 or 15 passengers. Most are painted outstanding colours and patterns and given a name, which can be colloquial slang, the name of a movie, movie character, song or artist. This is printed on the top of the windscreen or across the front, and sometimes on the back and sides as well.

On the more populous islands, such as Trinidad, you can take larger buses to many of the major towns and cities; you buy the tickets in advance. However, you can also take smaller buses, called rural buses, which take you as the name indicates to the rural villages. They operate the route two to three times a day, and you pay the driver at the end of the trip.

On some islands, the bus service is operated by the government, in others, by private enterprise. Barbados, for example, has both. Bus fares are fixed. The fares depend on the distance you are going. Short trips may be from EC\$2 to \$5. Longer trips, such as from St. George's to Grenville in Grenada, are around EC\$6.

One important thing to keep in mind is that most of these vehicles are privately owned, often by the driver, so they do not want their vehicles dirty or damaged. Many owners spend a lot of money in upholstery, tinting of windows, music systems and elaborate paint

Public Transportation — Caribbean Style

jobs — all an effort to make their vehicle "cooler" than the others, in the hope that more people will want to travel with them. So if you are muddy and wet from hiking, do not count on taking public transportation to your destination. It is better to arrange alternative transportation in this case, or bring a change of clothes and a plastic bag for your slimy gear. Also, since seats are positioned close together, it is not advisable to use these mini-buses if you have lots of bulky parcels.

colour of the lateral bands across the vehicle indicates the route.

There are also bus stops along the routes, indicated by signs or clusters of people standing by the road. Some bus stops have shelters.

At the bus station or taxi stand, you stick your arm up and wave to get the driver's attention.

In almost all of the islands you can also flag down a bus almost anywhere along the route by sticking your arm out and waving it slightly up and down.

Once you have the driver's attention, you should indicate how many persons in your party are traveling, either by yelling it, mouthing it or holding up your hand indicating the number with your fingers. Then the driver can let you know if he has the space or he may refer you to one of his friends that does.

Of course you have to understand the signals made by the drivers. If the minibuses or car is full, the driver will give a wave or shrug his shoulders if you hail him along the route.

When boarding, always double-check with the driver to ensure he is going to your desired location, as there may be multiple routes to his final destination. To avoid a traffic jam, an accident, road maintenance or rush hour, the driver may not always use the route that passes by your stop.

There are various ways to get the driver to stop and let you off. In St. Kitts you yell when it is your stop. In Grenada you tap on the side of the bus. In Trinidad you use a buzzer placed on the wall at the end of each row of seats.

Paying the fare is usually done near the end of the trip. In mini-buses, you give the money to either the driver or the conductor (if there is one). The conductor's job at the bus station is to call people over to travel and fill up the vehicle with passengers. He then rides along on the trip, collecting the fares, letting the driver know when a person wants to get off, spotting passengers along the way and letting the driver know if there is space. Think of him as an "in-vehicle secretary", keeping track of all these things so that the driver is free to drive. He might also open and close the door, flip folding seats up and down, and help with parcels. There are also persons referred to as "touts". They only fill up the vehicles and remain at the station or stand. In exchange they receive a small fee from the driver for their service.

As in any part of the world, there are just some times when you should avoid using public transportation, for example, at the start and end of the school and work day when buses are crowded and drivers tempted to go fast. Also, when the weather is bad some drivers might not come out to "ply the route". Many, being self-employed, have the power to do so.

Armed with this knowledge, when next you anchor at any of the islands, take an inland tour on public transportation and travel like a local.



Now that we know how to identify the vehicles and are acquainted with travelling etiquette, how do you actually go about taking public transport in the Caribbean?

You can get these mini-buses at a bus station, which in most cases is a large parking lot where the buses are arranged so that each route has a section. On some islands, the route is given a number, or the names of the destinations are written on the top third of the windscreen, as in Grenada. In Trinidad, the