

On the buses

If travel is all about the journey, then how you get there is half the fun, writes Katie McGonagle

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It was a hot, humid day in the middle of the Brazilian summer, so getting on a bus wasn't overly appealing. "It's all part of the experience," insisted our Intrepid Travel guide Pedro, as he cheerily flagged down a bus and shepherded us on like a school teacher.

As a Londoner, I'm no stranger to public transport – draughty in winter, sweaty in summer, and nothing to write home about in between – but that bus journey in Fortaleza, Brazil, was different.

Feeling a bit less like a tourist and a bit more like a local with every minute, it wasn't about getting from A to B but about giving us more of a connection to the country than would ever be possible from the confines of an air-conditioned coach.

Not that there's anything wrong with a little comfort now and then, especially when you're travelling long distances or you have a schedule to keep (I'm not sure I'd have wanted to do our entire Brazilian tour by bus, no matter

how enthusiastic Pedro was).

Whether it's a tuk tuk tour or a scenic rail journey, here we weigh up the pros and cons of local transport so you know how to turn it into a key selling point.

► LIVING LA VIDA LOCAL

Pedro wasn't the only Intrepid guide giving his guests a feel for local transport. Managing director Michael Edwards says: "Travelling by public transport, whether it's a bus or overnight train, is an ideal way to



TOP TIP

Collette lists every type of transport – including the quirkier ones – for each tour in its 2017-18 brochure



G Adventures' Lando vehicle

→ experience local life and strike up conversation with fellow travellers. The scenery often gives a new perspective on a country away from the tourist trail, such as winding through suburban backstreets of Beijing or past paddy fields in Vietnam. While agents should make clients aware that conditions can be basic, our travellers tell us the train journeys are often a highlight of their trip.”

Look out for quirkier modes of local transport to help sell a tour – think travelling by rickshaw through Beijing with Tauck, going on a tuk tuk ride through Delhi and a felucca cruise along the Nile with On The Go Tours, or a Trabant Safari through Berlin courtesy of Riviera Travel.

These aren't just gimmicks – taking a traditional or unusual form of transport can cast the landscape in a different light, and uncover valuable social history along the way.

▶ SPEED SELLS

Local transport need not be old school: Japan's bullet trains put British Rail to shame, making a time-efficient addition to any Far East itinerary. InsideJapan Tours feature the bullet train, for example, while sister brands InsideVietnam and InsideBurma are less reliant on public transport as the network is less extensive and less reliable in these countries. Meanwhile, Wendy Wu Tours normally favours luxury coaches, but makes an exception for the bullet train in Japan and between Xi'an and Beijing on its Glories of China tour.

Head of marketing Ben Briggs says: “We use public transport on occasion, especially where there has been high customer demand for it. The Jewels of Japan trip uses bullet trains between cities to give customers a real feel for local life, and it is in fact the quickest way in many cases. Public transport such as this can



These vehicles make a difference on a safari. You pay more, but the enhancement is worthwhile

be a real experience in itself, and of course tour guides are on hand to ensure everyone boards safely and smoothly.”

▶ OFF-ROAD ADVENTURES

There are some places that public transport can't reach – you have very little chance of hailing a number 38 in the middle of the Serengeti, and you definitely won't get three at once – so for those, there are specially designed overland vehicles.

G Adventures overhauled its fleet with new Lando vehicles last summer, offering a comfortable ride with extra shoulder room, bigger windows, and side windows for photography.

'Authentic' 4x4s are also in use on Titan's Kenya and Tanzania tours. Richard Tarrant, head of marketing communications, says: “On a traditional safari, it makes a difference to travel in these

vehicles rather than coaches or minibuses. You do pay more, but the enhancement is worthwhile.”

The similarly tough terrain of the Kimberley in Western Australia also posed a challenge for APT, which has custom-built Mercedes-Benz and Isuzu 4X4 vehicles carrying up to 20 passengers to some of the world's most remote landscapes, with seat rotation so everyone gets a turn at the window.

▶ ALL MOD CONS

While quirky forms of transport can enrich the experience, passengers' time will still mostly be spent in coaches or minibuses – and there are plenty of plus points for these too. They give time for the group to bond and for tour leaders to brief guests on what's ahead, and offer the flexibility to stop for photos or toilet breaks without being beholden to a train timetable.

Many operators have also invested significantly in their fleet over recent years: Leger Holidays has expanded its Luxuria fleet to five this year, covering 84 itineraries, Cosmos Tours' Select by Globus range is also proving popular, while Grand American Adventures updated its minivans last year with more storage, TV screens and bigger windows. **TW**



ABOVE:
Rickshaw
ride, China

LEFT:
4x4 drive,
Australia

PICTURES: OUTBACK PHOTOGRAPHICS NT/STEVE STRIKE; TAUCK