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## Bliss of the bus-crawl

Over-60s are set to ride free on all England's local services. It's liberating, if you don't forget to signal

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**David McKie**

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To the catalogue of mostly desirable things one is not permitted to do until one is old enough, such as drinking, driving or getting married, there is now to be added another. Tomorrow sees the launch of the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme (ENCTS), under which the right of people over 60 to travel free outside morning peak hours in the areas where they live will be extended right across England. Thus elderly persons in Cumbria - along with some disabled passengers - will be able to roam free of charge through Cornwall, while the over-60s of Lancashire may explore at no cost the delights of Leicestershire (and there are delights in Leicestershire: let nobody tell you otherwise). This applies, be warned, to the humble service bus, not to the highspeed coach or to the train.

The joys of the pass are not confined to the picturesque. They are useful for routine journeys, to the workplace if you've still got one, or the shops or to visit the family. But perhaps this new countrywide freedom will be used most of all to explore. Not long ago, while compiling a book, I spent months travelling round the country by service bus, discovering as they deviated down byways on their way to their advertised destinations many delightful small towns and villages I had never previously heard of. Pub-crawling and church-crawling are

well-documented pastimes, but bus-crawling (and my goodness, some of them really do crawl) is worth indulging in too. And for those who have yet to pass 60, there are many bus companies all round the country that will treat you to a full day's travel at quite merciful rates.

What you need to plan these outings is a decent map and a set of timetables. But always read the small print. In that strange confected mini-new town, South Woodham Ferrers, Essex, I stood for a good half-hour awaiting a bus to Bradwell-on-Sea. Eventually I rang the operator. "The bus isn't running today," a doleful voice informed me. "But it says in the timetable: Thursdays only," I whined, "and this is a Thursday." "Ah," said the doleful voice, "but it doesn't say every Thursday, does it." And later in very small print I saw the warning I'd missed: "Runs alternate Thursdays." You are required to phone to ask which are the ones when the bus is in action.

Then there's the rural bus etiquette which calls for vigorous waving. In Saturday's Guardian, Simon Hoggart mocked a service in North Yorkshire that warns its would-be passengers to give clear signals to the driver as the bus is approaching. I'm afraid such warnings are truly necessary. Outside the big cities, buses may not respond until they are waved at. On a 556 from Newquay to Padstow (a glorious ride: do get off and acquaint yourself with St Mawgan) I heard head office rebuking the driver for allegedly flashing past a stop without picking up passengers. He remembered the incident: he'd approached the stop quite slowly and seen there were people waiting but they hadn't given a signal and hadn't even stirred from where they were standing. "Signal and stir" should be the traveller's watchword out in the sticks.

Hoggart also noted another peculiar usage: the practice of one country bus becoming another. Some of these buses are so deeply into metamorphosis you suspect they've been reading Ovid. Coming from Happisburgh on the Norfolk coast to North Walsham, I leapt from my Sanders Coaches 34 route in the fear that the 736 towards Potter Heigham might have already left. Just in time I noticed that the 34 from which I'd dismounted had now been transformed by a flick of the driver's wrist into the 736 and was just about to depart.

I have to say that apart from the odd curmudgeon, I have found the drivers of rural buses, including the one who had caused such offence between Newquay

and Padstow, a friendly and helpful breed. The best companies too (which are often the small ones) will happily recommend their most enjoyable journeys (this is how I discovered the Western Greyhound 556 and now know that the 501 Newquay to St Ives, summer only, is worth trying too). In places like Cornwall, the time to make these journeys is now, before its roads are clogged with cars, and buses run late, and connections are missed and the joys of the liberation that is ENCTS from tomorrow may not be quite so unqualified.

· David McKie's Great British Bus Journeys is published by Atlantic Books  
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