**Services like BoltBus make travel cheap, but are they cheapening travel?**

No car? No cash? No problem. With the advent of cheap, “alternative” travel, crossing the border is easier than ever. But are transport services like BoltBus cheapening the experience of travelling “meaningfully?”

Since it launched in June of 2012, the Seattle-Vancouver BoltBus route has “seen a nearly 60 percent increase in customers,” according to Lanesha Gipson, Senior Communications Specialist at Greyhound. BoltBus was launched in 2008 in the Northeast by Greyhound before expanding to the West Coast in spring of 2012. Destinations within the States include over a dozen stops, particularly at popular locations like Portland, Las Vegas and San Francisco.

The trip takes about 4 hours, with a stop in Bellingham, and of course, at the border. Fares however at around $15-$25 with a lucky few snagging then $10 or even $1 tickets.

Darby Jenny, a student in Seattle, said she used the service to visit an ex-boyfriend.

“As far as bus travel goes it was fairly nice, the drivers were good and friendly,” she said. ”I've been to Canada before in just a regular car with family and comparatively they asked the same questions and I felt I was treated the same.”

Nothing special. So why BoltBus?

“It was one of the cheaper options and it had WiFi.”

Equipped with outlets, Internet, and a restroom, it’s a popular choice compared to it’s less comfortable cousin, the Greyhound bus. The route is a perfect way for college to get across the border on long weekends. (Be careful though, [a DUI](http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/dui-record-can-keep-you-barred-from-canada/) can keep you from crossing the border).

But is the ability to hop over the border on a whim and an hours paycheck devaluing travel?

Naraelle Hohensee said that it’s possible. Hohensee is the Outreach Coordinator of International Programs with the [Comparative History of Ideas](https://chid.washington.edu/) (CHID) department at the University of Washington.

The department is known for valuing and emphasizing travel as a part of the curriculum. There is a particular focus on ensuring that the travel is meaningful.

“If anything, [BoltBus] may make travel *more* like a mode of quick consumption rather than a meaningful, thought-provoking experience,” Hohensee said in an email. “CHID promotes travel that is based on collaboration, curiosity, reciprocity, compassion, self-reflexivity, and criticality vis-a-vis travel itself. I'm not sure a $15 bus ticket gets you those things, and I can see it, potentially, working against many of them.”

Hohensee said that the lower prices may simply reflect a demand created by a somewhat recent cultural norm of travelling.

“I do think that overall, travel has become much more accessible and people now move about the globe more than ever before,” she said. “Whereas going to Europe may have been a once-in-a-lifetime luxury for many people twenty years ago, it's commonplace now. On the other hand, as demand has risen for things like hostels, travel there has gotten more expensive. Perhaps services like BoltBus reflect a response to this increased demand.”

Hohensee compared BoltBus to AirBNB and Jet Blue — a couchsurfing service and an airline that offer noticeably lower fares than mainstream services. These businesses, then, are all a response to a culture that has extended travel to all income brackets, not just the wealthiest. However, Hohensee said that she thinks it’s unlikely that low-income individuals and families frequently use these services, as travel means time off of work.

BoltBus was unable to provide specific rider information for competitive reasons. It’s clear however that the “popular,” “high volume” Seattle-Vancouver route may be part of a national trend.

[A report released in 2014](http://www.ourenergypolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/travel.pdf) by the Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development out of DePaul University found that services like BoltBus are thriving.

“Discount city-to-city bus companies, including BoltBus and Megabus, have dramatically expanded in recent years,” the report said. “[These companies] have added service at a rate far faster than any other transportation mode.”

The institute also discovered in this study that these services were saving American travelers “a cumulative monetary savings of $1.2 billion annually.”

The report said that airlines are becoming increasingly less popular options for travel. [A policy analysis](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1960014) by Randal O’Toole for the Cato Institute in 2011 also found that BoltBus was a direct competitor to other on-the-ground modes of transport.

“As well as offering an alternative to traditional bus services, Megabus, BoltBus, Greyhound Express, and other curbside carriers often compete directly with Amtrak,” he wrote. “Between Chicago and Milwaukee, Greyhound Express offers 11 daily departures compared with Amtrak’s 7.”

He argued that while the trip via BoltBus took longer, the fare was a fraction of the cost and offered more travel flexibility.

So the question remains: As transportation like BoltBus grows increasingly popular and remains competitively priced, will travel itself be cheapened?

Perhaps more importantly, will crossing the borders between countries lose the significance it once had? And is that a bad thing?

Even those with raised eyebrows have to admit: The way we travel has changed and even if it feels “cheap” it’s certainly affordable.