

Few remain strangers on trip by Greyhound

ABOARD THE BUS, YOU WILL NOT BE BORED

TICKET TO RIDE

Ticket to Ride is a four-week Sunday series examining bus travel from Cincinnati, fares and why people are traveling. Next week: Lori Kurtzman takes Greyhound to Nashville, Music City, USA.

By Lori Kurtzman

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The Cincinnati Greyhound terminal is a bustling little place this Tuesday morning, all noise and lines and luggage and people devouring stale nachos for breakfast. Time does not exist here.

Some bleary-eyed travelers have spent all night rolling through the countryside. The fresh-looking ones, all wrinkle-free and odorless, are just starting their trips.

They are strangers, but not for long.

By the end of this trip, they will observe the stretch marks of a burgeoning pregnancy, will discover a 17-year-old on his way to finally meet his father, will see the remnants of the black eye a young woman gave her boyfriend during a drunken fight. The trip will be punctuated by tales of rape and abuse and homelessness and hope and love and topless girls. Passengers will watch a Vin Diesel movie.

Let's just say: Aboard the Greyhound, we will not be bored.

So we'll start here, in the line for the bus to Columbus. In our hand is a roundtrip ticket, \$31.20 for a ride on the most popular jaunt out of Cincinnati. The bus takes off just before noon, and it's a beauty: clean and air-conditioned, no strange smells coming from the restroom. The driver pops in "The Pacifier," a 2005 Disney flick starring bald beefcake Vin Diesel – nobody complains – and we are off on a smooth trip 100 miles up Interstate 71.

And then things start to get weird.

In front of us is another bald guy, in sunglasses, who'd freaked us out earlier in the bus station, before we learned how things operate in this world. He'd set a big black duffel bag on the ground and asked if we'd watch it. He didn't wait for an answer.

"Ain't no bombs in there," he promised, then walked off.

Um. Uh. Sir? We listened for ticking. We debated strolling away, pretending we didn't hear him. We did neither. Bald guy returned and whisked the bag away without explosion.

He says his name is Keith Jamison. He's 37, lives in Halifax and fixes up houses for a living. He'd recently closed a deal on a place near Puget Sound and now was returning home to Canada. From Columbus he'd travel to Caribou, Maine, and then through New Brunswick on his way to Nova Scotia. By the end of his trip, he'd take 17 buses over 5 days.

"It's not fun," Jamison says.

He doesn't talk much.

Everyone's friend

That's OK, though, because across the aisle we have Sarah Wilson, who seems to have befriended everyone on the bus. At one point, a phone rings in the front and its owner passes it back. The call is for Wilson.

"How I got here," Wilson says, "is a...miracle."

Wilson is an attractive 24-year-old woman with spiky blond hair and big loopy earrings. She's fleeing Greenville, S.C. Just left on a whim. She was approached by a Georgia couple at church who bought her a \$107 bus ticket, loaded her up with snacks and some spending cash and sent her off to her hometown, Mount Vernon. The woman handed over a gold watch so Wilson would have a way to tell time.

"I've patiently been waiting five years to come back," Wilson says.

That's the normal part of the story. Soon Wilson is talking about an incarcerated ex-boyfriend, about the two men, one of them a police officer, who raped her, about how she used to weigh nearly 300 pounds and lost almost half of it. She says she's four months pregnant. She says a guy she has never met in person, an Army medic, is picking her up in Columbus.

She seems to enjoy shocking us, and she does it well, dragging us outside the Columbus station and into a park to meet her Facebook beau. Zachary Barlow is 22 and baby-faced and will surely be devoured by Wilson, but we'll let him figure that out. They greet each other awkwardly and she hands him a sack of gummy Army guys.

"Sweet," Barlow says. "I love candy."

Stories shared

Moving on. You may have a perception of Greyhound, of people who ride the bus, of what it's like out there on the road. You're probably right, and you're probably wrong. For every outlandish character like Wilson, there's a quiet guy like 32-year-old Bo Clayton, all wrapped up in a blanket, traveling from Kilgore, Texas, for a trucking job in Maysville, Ohio. For everyone shushing a fellow passenger, there's someone like the young man at the Columbus station who stopped a stranger from picking up a pay phone.

"Don't waste your money," he said, handing over his cell phone.

The bus is a place where strangers share stories and e-mail addresses, where the scene outside is secondary to the one inside. It's where tiny dramas play out and brief friendships are formed and bathroom lights don't always work. It's a way to get from one point to another, sure, but it's also a way to learn about a life that's not your own.

Which brings us to the ride back. We're at the back of a long line bound for Cincinnati. Well, not the back – that's a spot held by a woman who's screaming at her husband. Apparently he left her with a pile of luggage and went for a smoke, and his break went too long, and she had to take a bathroom break of her own. So they lost their place in line.

"We're not going to get a seat on the bus!" she shouts, which seems ridiculous, but she's right. The bus fills up and there are still 20 or so of us in the station, hoping to get to Cincinnati. People don't tell you about that part. We have to wait for the next bus, which arrives rather quickly, and everybody piles into a bus that was nothing like the one that brought us here.

Good bus, bad bus

This one smells. Like cigarettes and something else, something unpleasant. Trash is under the seats. Graffiti decorates the backs of them. The light in the john is broken.

The bus driver is no-nonsense. She launches into a list of what's forbidden on the bus: smoking, alcohol, narcotics, perfumes and colognes, ringing phones. Under no circumstance are we to approach her while the bus is in motion, she says.

Welcome aboard.

We are sandwiched between two new friends. Juliann Gohlke is a 21-year-old Oakley woman who looks 12. She's tiny, with a ball cap over her short hair. Mike Pierce, from Harrisburg, Pa., is 17 with the face of an angel and eyebrows of the devil. He lifts his swoop of bright blond hair to show us and there they are, two stiff upside-down Vs over his eyes.

Gohlke's on her way home from visiting her adoptive parents in Chambersburg, Pa. Pierce is headed to Nashville to meet his father for the first time. He mentions this casually.

"I'm 17 and I have no clue what he's like," Pierce says. "I think it's time that I found out."

So we roll along, Pierce and Gohlke swapping outrageous stories – Gohlke of living on the streets, of a recent miscarriage, of dotting her boyfriend's eye during a fight, Pierce of a fight with a principal, a pregnant girlfriend, a bizarre love triangle involving his mom and her sister. Turns out Wilson had nothing on these kids, assuming anybody on these rides is telling the truth.

By the time the bus rolls into Cincinnati, just after 8 p.m., there's not much left to say.

Gohlke gets out and hugs her boyfriend, whose eye is healing nicely. We leave Pierce behind at the station, where he waits for his next bus. In a way, his journey is just beginning.

Greyhound travel by the numbers

Columbus is the most popular Greyhound destination from Cincinnati, drawing 8,123 riders last year, according to company managers.

Most people leaving Columbus, though, go to Cleveland – 11,131 in 2008.

Those on the bus are a varied lot with a long list of reasons for traveling, but Greyhound says of the nearly 25 million riders who jumped aboard its buses in the U.S. and Canada last year:

Most travel to visit family and friends, although nearly one-quarter take the bus for business.

Nearly half are between 18 and 34.

One-third make more than \$35,000 per year.

Many have their own cars but take the bus to save money.

Most, nearly 60 percent, travel less than 450 miles.

They pay an average ticket price of \$45.