

How to get there with money left in your pocket

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A trip from Rutland to Manchester to do a little shopping will cost you around \$8 in the typical car. On the bus, it's half that or less.

That commute from Barre to your desk in Montpelier? About \$3 day in the average car. Getting there on a bus pass will save you \$43.50 a month, or \$522 a year.

With gas prices pinching already thin wallets, public bus service can be a money-saving way to get to shopping, medical appointments or a job.

Many of Vermont's larger communities have at least limited bus service. Marble Valley Regional Transit District, known as "The Bus," serves the Rutland area and has routes to Manchester, Middlebury, Killington, Proctor and Fair Haven.

Green Mountain Transit Agency serves the Barre-Montpelier area and has routes extending to Waterbury, the Stowe-Morrisville corridor and Burlington.

Here's what you'll need to know to start cashing in, based on information from the bus companies and firsthand experience.

What you'll need

A bus schedule, correct change or a multi-ride pass, an umbrella and a certain amount of patience and flexibility.

- Schedules are available on the Web and often at bus stops or on the buses.
- Bus fare collection boxes don't make change, and drivers can't. Make sure you have the right amount (in bills and/or coin). If your karma is good, a fellow rider might chip in a quarter if you're short, but don't count on it.
- Many bus stops are just a spot on the sidewalk, with no shelter. If you're sure it won't be raining later when you're waiting for a return ride, go ahead and leave the umbrella at home. Are you feeling lucky?

- It's not just about you: Buses are there for everyone, and sometimes that means being patient while a young parent struggles to get a stroller through the door or the driver hops off to operate the wheelchair lift. Some bus systems even allow riders to request (in advance) deviations from the standard route, so on rare occasions you can find yourself making an unexpected detour. Traffic backups due to road repairs can keep drivers running behind as well. The bottom line is that schedules aren't set in stone, so plan accordingly.

What it costs

Standard adult fares range from nothing (on the Rutland-to-Fair Haven route) to \$4 for commuter routes from Montpelier to Burlington. Senior discounts, 10-ride punch cards and monthly passes can cut that considerably.

For example, a one-way trip on Rutland's local buses (say, from North Main Street to Diamond Run Mall on the other end of town) costs 50 cents for adults, 25 cents for seniors and the disabled. A monthly pass lets you ride all you want for \$15 (\$7.50 for seniors and the disabled).

Standard fares in the Barre-Montpelier area are \$1, with discounts available of roughly 50 percent.

What to expect

Local buses become a sort of rolling community, where drivers and passengers get to know each other and look out for each other. You'll hear regular riders boast about picking up more hours at work or complain about a cheating boyfriend.

The longer routes serve mostly commuters going to work or school. Shorter around-town routes also serve people who can't drive because of health problems, developmental disabilities or other reasons, such as DUI convictions. You can often hear these tribulations discussed freely (and too loudly to ignore) among your fellow riders or on cell phones. A ride to work can become a bit of a soap opera on wheels.

Sometimes the surprises are a different kind. One rider recently thrust a yellow flower into the hand of

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a fellow passenger, a stranger, just before hopping off the bus with a smile.

How to ride

- Familiarize yourself with the schedule and stops for your trip. Get there a few minutes before the bus is due. Most stops are marked with some kind of sign.
- Most buses are now equipped with fare collection boxes just inside the door. Some have a slot on top for you to feed in a bill (as on vending machines); for others just fold the bill and drop it into the box with the coins.
- Sure, it's early and you need your caffeine, but generally you're not supposed to eat or drink on the bus, and smoking is never allowed. Cell phone conversations, while not necessarily against the rules, are best kept short and quiet out of consideration for fellow riders (and to save yourself embarrassment; see "What to expect" above).
- On some routes, riders can signal to request a stop between regular drop-off points. Because of traffic flow in Rutland city, the bus can stop only at designated places, but on outer routes passengers can request additional stops. The local Barre-Montpelier area routes generally allow for unofficial stops.

As you are boarding, it's a good idea to tell the driver where you would like to be let off, then use the stop signal as the bus nears the spot. There's a cord to pull or a touch-strip mounted on the inside of the bus between the windows. Pull or push firmly; usually a buzzer will sound and a "Stop requested" sign above the windshield will light up.

If you start to become a regular rider, don't be surprised if the driver learns your routine and asks if you're going to the usual place.

- Riders generally can also flag a bus down between stops on local routes – just briefly raise your hand or otherwise signal the driver. But remember that every extra stop takes time, especially if the driver has to nudge back out into heavy traffic. If there's a stop 50 yards down the street, leave a little early and walk there if you can, so you don't make the driver pull over twice.

Rider's tip

If you absolutely have to catch a particular bus to get to work or an appointment on time, it's wise to flag it down even if you're standing near a bus stop sign. Some stops are request-only — unless someone requests, the bus doesn't stop — and you can find yourself watching your ride disappear down the road. Most drivers are vigilant about watching for a signal from among people on the sidewalk.

Wheels on board

Accessibility — All Green Mountain and Marble Valley buses are wheelchair accessible, and people don't need to request a wheelchair pickup in advance on a regular route.

For those who have trouble walking, drivers will happily lower the lift so the passenger can avoid the one or two steps that many buses have just inside the door.

Bicycles — The vast majority of buses have racks on the outside, usually with room for two bikes — first come, first served. If those spots are full, you can't bring a bike inside. (One rider tried to get around that rule by suggesting the driver just consider his bicycle a wheelchair; that gambit was politely but firmly rebuffed.)

It's up to the rider to load and unload the bike; usually there's a handle to grab to lower the rack into position. The bike sits upright with its tires resting in a pair of slots; a sort of spring-loaded hook latches over the front tire to hold it stable. Don't hesitate to ask the bus driver to explain the rack's operation, although they're generally quick to offer if anyone looks confused.