

Guest Column: I'm lucky because I can take the bus

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Call me crazy, but I enjoy public transportation, especially since I've moved West where I work at various ski town restaurants.

The bus frees me of car payments and parking fees, is usually connected to my ski pass, and allows me to read or sleep while someone else dodges elk and ice patches. And sometimes, there are adventures.

Eight winters ago, when I lived in Alta, at the top of Utah's Little Cottonwood Canyon, the bus driver asked passengers to get out and push a car that was stuck in snow in front of us. I remember grumbling that I chose a car-free life so I wouldn't have to do stuff like that. But the driver had a schedule to keep and four strong, young passengers who helped him maintain that schedule. Plus, it made for a good story.

Then last winter in Jackson, Wyoming, on a minus 10-degree night, I was running late after a bar shift that barely allowed me to catch the last scheduled bus. There was no time to use the restroom before rushing out the door. When the bus arrived late, I regretted this omission.

The town of Jackson had recently acquired a fleet of electric buses, to reduce the county's carbon footprint, and the driver explained that the cold had drained the battery. We were at 5 percent.

Leaving Teton Village, with the heater off to preserve power, the bus struggled to accelerate. By the Snake River crossing, we maxed out at 12 miles per hour. The full moon outside illuminated ranchland with cattle and snowdrifts as our speed dwindled to 5 mph.

Eventually, we lost all remaining power two miles before town. That frigid night, I was the only woman stranded on a dark bus with no heat at 11:30 p.m. in the wilds of Wyoming. But I wasn't concerned. Three of the other four passengers were co-workers: We were in this together.

After 10 minutes of shivering, another bus arrived. But how to exit our dead bus when the only non-electric exit was the driver's sliding window? My colleagues insisted on "ladies first." Being more or less athletic, I didn't think jumping would be difficult, but the window was higher than I expected and my decision to skip the restroom made this situation more pressing. I looked down at my dangling legs, scooped, leaped, and landed squarely — with no consequences.

As I thawed out in the new bus to town, I thought about how this situation might have been different in a city. Cities have more buses, but Wyoming has snow and a can-do spirit.

A few weeks later, a fluke injury had me hopping onto a bus. Easy, I thought, the bus stopped in front of my apartment and the hospital. But once I hobbled out of my building without a crutch, my assumption proved wrong. A tourist at my apartment bus stop, who happened to be a nurse, noticed my predicament and offered me a supporting arm.

Michelle, the woman driving the bus, asked what happened.

"YouTube yoga," I told her, "and when the video ended, I couldn't stand up." Michelle talked with me all the way to the hospital, thus preventing me in my anxious, under-insured state from stressing about the bill.

At the hospital stop, I descended onto an icy sidewalk, wondering again how I had misjudged this situation.

"You can't hop all the way to the building!" Michelle called after me. In a moment that almost brought me to tears, Michelle left her bus to help me to the entrance, one hop at a time.

I got to know Michelle better on follow-up visits to the hospital, and occasionally on a last bus home. She calls me an independent woman because I refuse to ask friends for a ride — even when I really need one.

I agree that that we all need friends to lean on, but sometimes, that friend turns out to be a stranger on the bus.

Rebecca Johnson is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, a nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. She commutes 12 miles — by bus, of course — to her job in Teton Village, Wyoming.

