

THE OPTIMIST

Public transport is the way to go

Richard Asher



I FLEW TO Durban recently. A freebie car launch trip for journalists. My only cost for this 24-hour jaunt would be getting to and from Cape Town airport.

'Hmm,' thought the profit-conscious free-lancer to himself. 'Why don't I try that shiny new airport bus that appeared when we hosted that lovely World Cup?'

Using the bus would be a tad cheaper than parking my car at the airport. It would also be a more environmentally (and therefore socially) responsible transport solution. I'd been on it before and I'd been impressed. So I walked down to the station with my hand luggage,

rode into town with Metrorail and hopped on the bus.

Just like the last time I used this service, I kept having to remind myself that I hadn't teleported to Switzerland. In the absence of a squawking *gaartjie*, it's easy to forget you're in South Africa. The bus interior is identical to a London single-decker, minus the roly-poly mums with double prams. It was so clean you could eat your dinner off the floor. It had arrived bang on time, gliding up to a gleaming glass-fronted platform.

12 minutes was all it took to shoot to the airport front door. A pretty satisfactory trip, all told.

One thing, though: I was the only one on the bus. So much for sharing my carbon emissions. All I'd done was swap my 1.4 Polo's fumes for those of a heavy-duty bus engine.

Was it just a quiet morning at the airport, perhaps? Hell no! It was teeming as always, with dozens of passengers jumping on flights to all corners of the country. Guess everyone else must have come to Cape Town International by car, then.

A year on from the public transport bonanza that was '2010', should we be surprised?

Probably not. South Africans push against change like souped-up sumo wrestlers. We have millions of smart, educated people, yet everything from online shopping to TV reality shows gets to us three years after being invented somewhere else. If our finest business brains are so slow to catch on, is it any wonder that our commuters are so pig-headed?

The thoughtless use of cars is in our DNA. I know this arose for valid reasons. Safe and reliable public transport has been non-existent for years, and for many of us it still isn't. Fine. But in some places around South Africa that has now changed. But our default setting to drive everywhere? No change there.

It is frankly staggering that a morning bus that runs from the middle of a city centre to a busy airport could ever be empty. It's not just Cape Town either: I hear most Gautrain bus drivers are cruising around Jozi with only the radio for company.

I'll grant you that R53 one-way to Cape Town

International is an exorbitant ask which gives me almost no economic incentive to use the bus. With empty buses running every 20 minutes, the powers that be could help by looking at a dramatic shift along the supply and demand curves. But I still say getting South Africans to change their thinking is by far the bigger challenge.


The kind of people who ignore these services are in many cases also the kind of people who complain about this country's infrastructure. I'll wager thousands of them are also people who have flown to London and gone into town on the tube without a second thought. These folk need to wake up and smell the diesel – we have some vastly improved transport links in our cities. But in our wisdom we ignore them. If that continues they won't last, and we'll have zero right to complain about taxis, smog, the petrol price or traffic.

I know cars are a lot of fun. I'm no saint: I've even been known to race them! I test cars, and write about them for a living. When carrying heavy goods or fragile grannies, I will happily use my car. But when there's a cheaper, greener alternative for regular commuting I also feel it's my duty to embrace it.

Too many of us continue to thud our backsides into the front seat out of sheer force of habit, many of us on our way to jobs in which we pontificate about the cost of living or sit in meetings about our company's green image. But making practical changes ourselves? Oh no, someone else will do that. My time's far too important.

No, we'll keep sitting in traffic jams. Even those really amusing ones outside petrol stations on certain Tuesday evenings. We'll just keep asking our significant others to pick us up from the airport because we know they will. We'll keep driving our one child to school instead of pooling with that other family around the corner. We'll take our chances getting hijacked.

And all the while, we'll whinge about the Springboks' outdated game plan and the fact that they won't change their ways.

Sometimes I think we deserve everything we get. 

Richard has also been overheard saying that real men carry their own golf clubs

