

Green is the new black...and blue

A daily commuter takes refuge in walking to work

By Rachel Eddy



I have never had a love affair with public transportation. Save for one pleasant Greyhound trip during which a chatty dentist from Pennsylvania bought me a muffin at a rest stop (which he then told me I shouldn't eat due to its high sugar content), the rumble-tumble of whatever mode of transport I choose leaves me feeling motion sick, inappropriately touched, or both. When I moved to New York City five years ago, where the allure of a new job in environmental grantmaking one-upped my commuting concerns, I bought a case of Dramamine and hoped for the best.

For two years, on the perma-brink of tears, I nudged my way through rush-hour crowds on the six train while praying for a sliver of pole around which I could curl my hand. Countless bodies suffocated all available space, umbrellas and newspapers tucked into the crevices I, at five feet and 100 pounds, fought to overtake. I guarded any territory I managed to secure first with stares, then elbows. (I reserved pinches only for emergency situations, the commonality of which rose at an alarming rate.) Every day, the drama queen in me came home, often sporting mysterious black and blue bruises from baby carriages and laptop cases, and proclaimed, "That was the worst trip of my life!"

"Worse than yesterday?" my then-boyfriend, now husband John would ask, amused by the passion in my voice.

"Way worse."

There didn't seem to be any other choice. While I could handle the subway off rush hour, my 9-5 schedule wouldn't allow for such luxuries. I didn't have a car – or even a license – and the cost of taking a taxi every day cut too deeply into my earnings. Besides, in my work of funding green-inspired conservation projects at a corporate foundation, it was literally my job to care about the environment.

I was in my office one afternoon, pulling on my boots in dread as I thought of stuffing myself back into the train, when John phoned to say he would be working late. He suggested I use the extra time before dinner to walk home – a two and a half mile feat yet unconquered. The idea that I, a woman whose last visit to the gym had been to sign her renewal slip six months earlier, could endure the walk struck me mid-lace. I tucked my subway pass back in my wallet and headed for

the door.

Somehow, placing one Ugg in front of the other, I made it to our fourth floor walk-up. Every layer of every bone ached. My face was red, and I was sweating despite the November chill, but I had found my stride – and didn't need to duck under fast-moving legs, dodge rolling suitcases, or endure crying babies to do it.

"That was the best trip of my life," I told John, and we together wondered why we hadn't thought of it before.

I turned the walk into a daily ritual, energized by the idea that I could help the environment while simultaneously enjoy it. I spent my days at work scouring the city for preservation projects to fund and my evenings saving the Earth, one subway pass at a time. My morning commutes became less tense with the knowledge that I wouldn't have to carve a spot again for a glorious 24 hours.

Given the freedom of the streets, I explored in a way most people didn't have time. I saw storefronts change, restaurants open and close, construction crews pow-wow. I ran into friends and former colleagues (and, less often and less welcome, former boyfriends) whose schedules didn't allow for a meeting except by chance. I stopped at farmers' markets for locally grown, organic produce, laughing at the selection I used to rely on from my neighborhood grocer. I didn't just see the city; I noticed it. That's impossible to do underground.

When I switched jobs earlier this year, my new office was located six miles north of my apartment – a two and a half hour walk. John asked if I planned to take the subway. My "no" was emphatic. I move from the northwest section of the city to the southeast every evening, enjoying the different neighborhoods, parks, and people along the way.

Walking home from work is the perfect blend of peace and quiet and also peace of mind. While it comes with its own list of problems (time consumption, weather-related hindrances, allure of ice cream shops on every corner), the positive effects channel through my less-bruised, pushed-around body. And by using my feet, I'm lightening my carbon footprint.

For two years, I went black and blue; now I've gone green.

It's a much nicer shade.