

YRT vs. Viva: How do they measure up?

Newmarket resident rode YRT in July and then Viva this month. Here's his account of the experience:

YORK REGION TRANSIT

BY BRIAN DUNDAS

S ometime back in June, prior to the launch of York Region's Viva rapid transit system, I decided to give public transit a shot. My, admittedly, limited logic went like this:

I live and work in York Region. Gas prices are skyrocketing. We have a transit system. Ah, the comforts of civilization.

If this works out, I can ditch the car, save gas, money and the Earth.

Although the trek from Newmarket to Woodbridge would require a GO Transit/YRT link, it was still only two buses to travel roughly 35 kilometres.

Pretty good, I figured. And with an invigorating early morning bike ride to the terminal and a leisurely 15-minute stroll to the office, I'd be getting my workout to boot.

I picked a lovely day in mid-July.

After 15 minutes of pedalling, I was at the depot, intensely proud and, frankly, rather in love with myself.

Springing proudly aboard the planet-saving vessel, I asked the driver for a ticket.

He looked at me as if I was wearing size-32 yellow sneakers and said I had to purchase one at the station kiosk.

I nearly choked when I found out it would cost me \$4.65 one-way to Hillcrest Mall in Richmond Hill, at which point I would have the opportunity to pay \$2.25 to take YRT to Islington Avenue along Rutherford Road.

So it's expensive. Oh well, I wouldn't be doing this every day. Maybe just on smog days when the government asks me to help spare the air.

The express bus makes four stops.

One of these is Hillcrest Mall, where I would be meeting the Rutherford YRT.

As we approached the mall, I realized I didn't know how to get off the bus. All I saw was a series of buttons with a red S.T.O. and P. That's precisely when I began to think too hard. What if these are emergency stop buttons? I wondered, rather stupidly.

Since I'd already informed the driver I was dismounting at the mall, I figured he'd stop.

About three blocks past the mall, I told him, meekly, that I'd wanted to get off "back there".

"You didn't ring the bell."

"I didn't know. I was standing right behind you."

"You'll have to wait until Langstaff," he informed me.

I got real ticked off. I suggested he and his mother must both be very proud of his customer service prowess. This tactic worked and he let me off the bus, a mere kilometre south of the mall.

Now I was facing a 25-minute wait for the next bus.

The afternoon ride was equally trying. I waited 20 minutes at a bus stop in 35C heat.

Fortunately, there was a row of maple saplings, each with about four branches and 20 leaves on them.

As I crouched in the shade of one, waiting another 20 minutes thinking how I'd rather be slaving on the transcontinental railway than taking public transit in York Region.

Ah, what a rube I'd been taken for.

After a five-hour commute and \$13.80, this wasn't an option for me.

Perhaps Viva is my answer.

I'll have to try it and see.

He looked at me as if I was wearing size-32 yellow sneakers and said I had to purchase my ticket at the station kiosk.



Newmarket resident and commuter Brian Dundas gets on the York Region Transit bus in July and rides it to his job in Vaughan. He waited until Viva got rolling in Newmarket and compared the two experiences.

VIVA

As Einstein once concluded, rapid is a relative term. So, it turns out, is rapid transit.

YRT took five hours commuting time and \$13.80.

I wanted to see if things had gotten any better for a commuter living and working in York Region in the past five months.

First, I walked 15 minutes and arrived at the spiffy Viva stop at Mulock Drive and Yonge Street, only to be confronted with a Hal 2000-like vending system. I took on the technological challenge and it was pleasantly surprising.

If there's one thing about the Viva system, it's easy to operate. Using a simple touch screen, I purchased a ticket. Unfortunately, the system doesn't provide change, so I ended up paying \$4 for the \$3.25 fare to Richmond Hill.

I must have just missed the bus because a digital sign above "Hal" told me I had 10 minutes to wait.

I liked the timer. Knowing I had 10 minutes took all of the niggling anxiety and pointless staring-up-the-road out of the equation. I think this feature is particularly useful in winter, as it gives you some idea on how much clothing you'll need to stave off hypothermia.

Leaping aboard the stretchy Viva capsule, I cautiously asked a woman operator with a lovely Jamaican accent for a transfer.

"You're holding it," she said with a smile, in reference to my ticket. Relieved she didn't ridicule me for being a neophyte, I practically skipped down the aisle and sat in the back. The bus was nearly empty.

Now, the way Viva has been promoted, I half-expected Playboy bunnies serving coffee.

While it wasn't quite like that, it really was darn nice, at first, trekking south in our little Viva pod. Comfortable chairs. Roomy aisles.

I looked for the fabled computer worktables and found them, unoccupied.

I wondered how long before they ripped them out and put in normal seats.

The new bus purred and resonated a white noise that nearly put me to sleep. At one point, I was almost irrevocably "Vivatized".

At Oak Ridges, though, like a drop of water falling in that old hamlet's Humber River headwater lakes, the Viva experience started downhill. And fast.

Richmond Hill, I found, has clogged arteries. Personally, I suspect dining on fat development deals to be the culprit, but, whatever the reason, progress down Yonge Street slowed to the pace of a CBC-labour negotiation.

Oh, it wasn't the fault of the bus, that's for sure, but rapid transit, this was not.

Finally arriving at Hillcrest Mall, I said goodbye to the Viva and hello to the portion of the trip governed by the old YRT system.

I quickly found the Rutherford Road YRT bus to be as problematic as ever.

I knew there was something up when I saw 15 people waiting for the west-bound bus; normally there are two or three.

Fortunately, my timing wasn't that bad. The transit Gods were in a generous mood because the bus arrived. The ride from Hillcrest to Islington Avenue was the usual slog, but much quicker than Yonge. Arriving at Islington, I took my 15-minute walk to work and checked my watch one last time. It had taken 2-1/2 hours.

The same as the old system, though the cost was now just \$6.50.

So, that about sums it up.

I propose the rapid deletion of all references to the word "rapid." It all reminds me of something else from Einstein.

He once said, "I never think of the future. It comes soon enough."

Not on Viva it don't.

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