

Luke Soup

by Luke Anderson



To boldly go where no wheel trans bus has gone before is the spicy ingredient in my soup this month. My mom is going to kill me when she reads this one... oh well.

I really can't complain about accessible transit in the city. The TTC provides accessible service daily to thousands of wheelchair users utilizing accessible vehicles, ramps and elevators. Out of many outings this winter when I used these services, they rarely let me down.

Most of my frustrating transit tantrums could have been avoided had I called ahead at least 24 hours to book rides, or checked on broken elevators. Waiting in an open parking lot in minus 20 degrees for 45 minutes and getting off at a subway stop only to find the elevator is stuck are two examples of such situations.

The question is what happens when I want to go somewhere on a whim. A spontaneous trip is not out of the question if the destination is within wheeling distance (weather permitting) of the subway, near an accessible stop or city bus route. Forget about calling wheel trans. "What's that guys? There are four steps to get in? How about we try to hook up next weekend?" It all sounds too familiar to me...

Enter "The Magic Bus".

For the past four months I have been on the hunt for my own van, one that I can easily wheel myself into, see out of, fit in a few extra passengers/party animals and, believe it or not, modify in the near future so that I can drive. Until that day comes, the vehicle would be parked just outside my building so that if I wanted to catch a concert I could count on a bud to drive us there.

The first accessible van I tried out belongs to the McTavish family in town, who have been most

generous in lending it. It's equipped with a power side entry lift and the centre seats have been removed so there is ample space for a wheelchair to park. Tie-downs have been bolted to the floor to secure the chair.

When travelling in the McTavish van in my power chair I have a slightly tricky time getting in through the sliding door because of a lack of head space. Once on board my view is slightly limited because my sight line is almost level with the top of the windows. However, the van has been great and I have enjoyed many outings in it. Using this van and others has shown me that some components work better than others.

The hunt for the Magic Bus has proved to be a real education. My most interesting experience occurred when my friends Pat and Ryan came to pick me up in a buddy's work van to take me to their house party. This trip took place in the early stages of my hunt for a van and proved conclusively that a buddy's work van does not double as an accessible vehicle.

At the time I gladly accepted Pat and Ryan's offer to come and get me, given their reassurance that I would "totally fit in the van... its huge man!" Excitement over not having to worry about a wheel trans booking overshadowed little issues that I was about to encounter including how I was going to get into the van...

This story has parallels to a previous column I wrote in which a makeshift collection of scrap wood was used to carry me from ground-level to a higher elevation. The rookie carpenters who starred in that story had one up on the carpenters in this episode -- they knew how to drive a nail into a piece of wood!

Pat and Ryan pulled up to the front of my building in a white Chevy van with a photocopier repair logo emblazoned on the sides. They opened the sliding

door to reveal two overturned office machines and a month's worth of old coffee cups amongst a plethora of junk.

They looked at each other, then at me the way a tire kicking used car salesman presents the deal of the week as they waited for my approval. My confidence diminished when I guessed that the pile of wood Pat was throwing out of the van was intended to serve as a ramp on which I was expected to drive my chair.

My concern grew as I watched Pat and Ryan strategically place, like Jenga, different pieces of wood until something that resembled a ramp materialized. Once finished, the concoction consisted of an old closet door as the main support and a few pieces of thin plywood to smooth the transition between ground to ramp and ramp to van.

Since they had tried their best to make this happen I attempted the unimaginable, manoeuvring my 450lb wheelchair so that the two front wheels rested on the ramp and proceeding up until all four wheels were on the ramp. I stopped mid-way and listened for signs of danger... the coast was clear and Pat assured me everything would be OK because his foot was preventing the boards from sliding outward.

That's just great, I thought. I stopped to wipe a bead of sweat from my face. At the top of the ramp I realized the opening was too low and had to lean forward and steer at the same time. After some grunting and groaning I squeezed my way into the van. Still leaning forward because of a lack of head space, I parked myself amongst the junk. It was uncomfortable, but we all shared a feeling of accomplishment and we were on our way to a good time!

Unloading was just as exciting and luckily uncatastrophic. We had beaten the transit system, arriving safely at a venue outside the wheel transit limits. On this note I'd like to say I'm hopeful my search will soon end for my Magic Bus and my arrivals to places outside of wheel transit limits will be safe, sweat free and most importantly... comfortable.

Wine Wine Wine

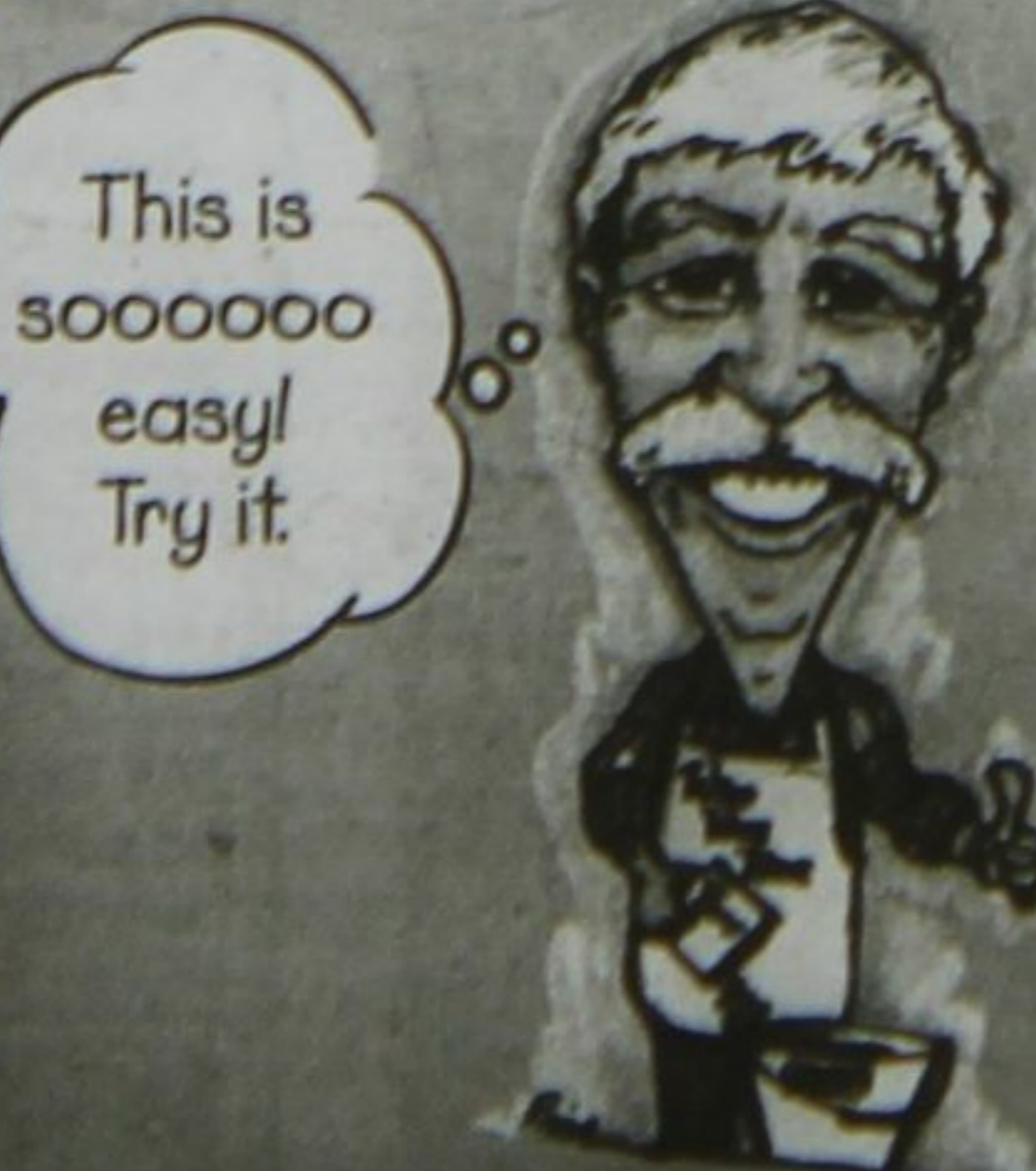
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