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Bus Travel, Africa

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Bus transport in Africa is usually provided by the informal sector, in the case of both urban and regional or interregional travel. State-owned formal bus systems operate in some countries but tend to be economically inefficient and have small coverage. However, some cities have started to implement bus rapid transit (BRT) systems. In rural areas, the network is sparse and the services are irregular. Some countries have an extensive network of intercity buses. The offering of international bus services is limited. Many roads are in poor condition, and the bus fleet tends to be old. Bus travel is usually subject to delays, overcrowding, and safety and security risks.

Formal Versus Informal Sector

State-owned bus companies were established in most African countries before or shortly after their independence. Most of these companies accumulated large debts over the years and allowed levels of service to deteriorate. The emergence of informal systems accelerated their decline. Many companies went bankrupt during the 1990s. In some cases, they were replaced with private or public–private companies.

Informal bus services are currently the main means of urban, regional, and interregional public transportation throughout Africa. These services use minibuses or vans with 9 to 24 seats, known as jitneys in the United States and by a range of different names in Africa, such as *louage* (Tunisia), *gbaka* (Abidjan), *danfo* (Nigeria), *chapa* (Mozambique), *matatu* (Kenya), *tro-tro* (Ghana), *toca-toca* (Guinea-Bissau), *fula-fula* (Democratic Republic of the Congo), and *dala-dala* (Tanzania).

The government may regulate the market by controlling market entry, managing terminals, allocating routes, and setting fares. However, in some cases, these tasks are the responsibility of associations of bus operators. The operators may be small companies or single individuals, in many cases operating a single vehicle. The costs of providing the service may be considerable, as operators may have to pay tolls for some roads and charges for using terminals. The costs of complying with regulations are also high. A study of several regions in Africa published by the World Bank concluded that the initial total cost of registration certificates, license, insurance, tests, taxes, and fees paid by bus operators was \$400 to \$650.

Competition for passengers in terminals and town centers is fierce, sometimes leading to confrontations between different operators. To avoid this problem, queuing is sometimes managed by associations of operators. In some places, different service providers operate their own terminals. In recent decades, informal bus systems have also faced increased competition from motorcycle taxis, especially in Nigeria, Cameroon, and Uganda.

Urban Bus Travel

Public-owned urban bus networks, using large vehicles, still exist in some large cities in Africa. Cities in South Africa have large formal bus networks. Formal systems also account for a relatively high proportion of public transportation trips in cities such as Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), where the public bus company is supported by subsidies from the city government. By 2014, other large cities, such as Kampala (Uganda) and Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania), had no formal bus networks. Where they exist, the formal bus networks have poor coverage; they usually do not cover informal settlements (slums) and some of the newly developed neighborhoods in suburban areas.

Most large cities also have a wide network of informal buses running along fixed routes but without schedules. Regional and interregional buses may also service suburban areas, as the buses approach their destinations in the city centers. Outside the peak times, services may be unavailable or have low frequency. These systems account for three quarters of all trips in cities such as Dakar (Senegal), Kigali (Rwanda), and Dar-es-Salaam.

In some cities, informal systems coexist with formal systems but usually have a much higher capacity. For example, according to a report published by the World Bank, the fleet of minibuses in Nairobi (Kenya) is 40 times larger than the fleet of large buses. The overall capacity of the public transport system in some cities may be very small compared with the size of the population. For example, in Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of the Congo), the bus and minibus systems provide only six seats per 1,000 people.

Several cities have started to implement BRT systems, following the successful use of these systems in South American cities. BRT systems use segregated road lanes and have frequent service. The implementation of the system usually involves the improvement of existing terminals, bus stops, and vehicles. The first BRT system in Africa opened in 2008 in Lagos (Nigeria), has a length of 22 kilometers (13.5 mi), and in 2013 served an estimated 200,000 passengers daily. BRT systems were implemented in Johannesburg in 2009 and in Cape Town in 2011. There are also plans for BRT systems in Dar-es-Salaam and Accra (Ghana).

Regional and Interregional Bus Travel

Some countries, such as Morocco, Tunisia, and South Africa, have an extensive network of intercity buses operated by several companies. In most countries, informal bus systems also serve regional and interregional routes. These buses usually have no schedules and depart only when they are full.

The offer of international bus services is limited. There are several connections between South Africa and neighboring countries, but in other regions of the continent, the services may be nonexistent, infrequent, or unreliable. Overland travel between capital cities often requires several days because of the distances involved. Connections between towns close to country borders are also limited, even by informal public transport. International borders may be closed to all road traffic, such as the one between Morocco and Algeria. In many cases, border formalities are lengthy, causing delays and dissuading passenger travel.

The conditions in rural areas are considerably worse than in urban and suburban areas. The financial viability of the services in these areas is low because of the dispersion of the population and low income levels. The availability of services is usually higher along major roads or roads in good condition. Villages far from these roads often have no services. Routes are not fixed. The frequency of the services varies according to the agricultural season and market days.

The availability and reliability of the services depends on the weather conditions; during the rainy season, roads may become impassable. The services are provided by a mix of different vehicles: private vehicles acting as shared taxis, vans, pickups, and minibuses. In some cases, the only available options for passenger travel are trucks used to carry produce.

Use

Fares in urban and regional and interregional bus services in Africa are usually small

compared with other parts of the world. The average fare for an urban trip is around \$0.30. However, this value represents a considerable proportion of the daily income of the poorest section of the local population. The fares in formal systems tend to be slightly more expensive than the fares of minibuses.

Usually, the roads used by bus services are in poor condition. The proportion of paved roads in most African countries is smaller than in other parts of the world. The vehicle fleet is usually old and imported secondhand from Europe. According to a survey of public transport operators in 45 countries, done by the Trans-Africa Consortium, 30% of the vehicles were between 10 and 15 years old, and 10% were over 15 years old. Overcrowding is common in both formal and informal systems. Minibus operators tend to overload the vehicle with passengers and freight to maximize the revenue from each trip.

Passengers often have to wait a long time until the bus is full and ready for departure. This may take several hours. Passengers may have to wait inside the vehicle to secure a seat, which is uncomfortable in the hot climate of most African countries. Buses may also cruise for passengers around the town before departing.

Journey times are subject to delays due to the poor conditions of the roads, vehicle breakdowns, and road congestion, which is an increasing problem in major links and in large urban areas. Lanes for the exclusive use of buses are largely nonexistent. The presence of street vendors at bus terminals, road junctions, and busy urban arteries also causes congestion. Bus trips are also delayed by the frequent checkpoints by police, customs, local authorities, or paramilitary groups.

The poor quality of the facilities available for passengers also contributes to the lack of attractiveness of bus services. Terminals often have poor conditions, and bus stops and shelters may be nonexistent or located on busy, polluted roads. In most cases, the provision of information is insufficient.

The safety record of bus systems also tends to be poor. Africa is the continent with a higher incidence of road traffic fatalities. Safety regulations are poorly enforced, and roads and vehicles are often in poor condition. Drivers of minibuses tend to drive at high speeds to maximize the number of trips done in a day and stop anywhere to pick up and drop off passengers. The use of informal bus services also poses security risks. Passengers may be attacked by other passengers or by bus drivers or staff during off-peak time or in isolated areas. Intercity buses crossing sparsely populated areas may also be the target of armed groups.

The diffusion of mobile phones in recent decades has increased the reliability of the services. Bus operators can use phones to obtain information about weather and road conditions before departure, and passengers can contact bus operators to obtain information about departure locations and times and possible delays.

In general, the services provided by both formal and informal bus systems in many African countries tend to be of poor quality, limiting the mobility of residents and visitors. This may hinder the development of the tourism industry in these countries. In most cases, there are few alternatives to fulfill the mobility needs of tourists, as urban and interurban railways are either nonexistent or are limited in coverage and quality of service. Regular bus services catering to tourists exist in South Africa but are rare in other countries.

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See also [Accessibility Issues in Travel and Tourism](#); [Highway/Freeway System, Africa; Regulation and Deregulation](#); [Transportation and Infrastructure Issues in the Developing World](#); [Travel Trends in Africa](#)

Further Readings

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