

HITCHHIKING GETS THUMBS UP IN CUBA

More Cubans are relying on hitchhiking in the communist country, where its bus system is aging and cars are scarce.

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Laura García doesn't have a car and the change in her pocket won't cover a 15-cent bus fare. But standing by a crumbling overpass, sweating in her shorts, sunglasses and skimpy top, the 18-year-old says a free ride is only an outstretched thumb away.

"People will take you. You can always find drivers to help," said García, who studies law in Havana and was going to see her parents in Pinar del Rio, a 90-minute ride west.

Hitchhiking is a way of life in communist Cuba, where cars are scarce, a gallon of gas costs a third of a civil servant's monthly salary, and public transportation is unreliable and overcrowded. Lately things have worsened, with even acting President Raúl Castro admitting in December that public transport was "practically on the point of collapse."

Last year, the government announced the purchase of 7,000 buses from China, and hundreds more Chinese buses are said to be on the way since Castro took power from his ailing brother Fidel in July.

Meanwhile, the hitchhikers are everywhere -- at street corners, crosswalks, stop lights. Whole families with luggage hitch to and from the airport. On the capital's outskirts, government inspectors wave down government vehicles. Those with empty seats must take hitchhikers, a law that results in 68 million free rides a year, according to the Communist Party newspaper Granma.

CIVIC DUTY

Most drivers believe it's their civic duty to give free rides, but sometimes a hitchhiker will hop in uninvited. Janeth González, 20, who climbed into a car stopped at a light, told the stranger at the wheel that she was headed to her home in downtown Havana. No big deal -- "Even the police do it," she said.

Cubans call hitchhiking "*pidiendo botella*," or "asking for a bottle" -- an age-old Cuban phrase connoting something for nothing.

Melba, an 18-year-old dance student still in her black tights as she hitchhiked from school, said she had been hitchhiking alone since she was 14. Preferring not to give her surname, she said the only problem she ever had was when the car that picked her up sideswiped another and she was delayed for two hours while the police sorted out blame.

"It would have been faster to take the bus that day," she said.

But it usually isn't. While aging school and passenger buses from Canada, Russia and Europe bounce along to uncertain schedules on Havana's potholed streets, more common are 18-wheelers known as "camellos," or "camels," because of their humped metal trailers and ability to pack in 200-plus sweaty passengers seated or clinging to ceiling bars.

The graffiti-splotched vehicles usually have no number or destination sign. But as a camello shudders to a stop and passengers surge aboard, they seem to know exactly where it's headed.

"It's chaotic, difficult. But the good thing is they wait for everyone to get on," said Maria Luisa Fernandez, a 38-year-old high school teacher waiting for a camello in the shadow of Havana's capitol dome. "We go on top of one another, but we all go."

The fare is a mere penny, but pickpockets and purse-snatchers, largely unheard of elsewhere in Cuba, are a problem aboard camellos, and women are sometimes groped.

The diesel-powered behemoths became common in the early 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba's economic lifeline. Aid from oil-rich Venezuela has helped ease transportation woes, though there are still too few camellos to go around. They are supposed to be phased out with the arrival of new buses.

ACQUIRING A CAR

Buying a new car and most used ones requires state permission, which is hard to get. But Cubans can own vehicles built before the 1959 revolution, including the classic, if weather-beaten, Mercedes, Hudsons, Mercurys and Buicks still cruising the streets, running on diesel to beat the \$4 price of a gallon of regular gas.

Awaiting a camello after a night shift at an energy plant, Néstor Pérez, a 40-year-old in a Cleveland Indians T-shirt, said hitchhiking is more comfortable than the bus -- but that he's at a disadvantage.

"If I have a pretty woman standing next to me, they will always stop for her," he said. "It's a waste of time for me."