

FEAR AND FASCINATION
SECRETS OF THE ITALIAN BUS SYSTEM



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BIG WORDS MADE SIMPLE.

Fear and Fascination: Secrets of the Italian Bus System

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I’m going to do the very best I can to help you, but ultimately, the only person who can improve your vocabulary (and SAT/ACT score) is you. Please don’t sue me.

A **perplexed** look **steals** across my face as I re-read my host sister's **enigmatic** text message. "You go towards down," she writes. "Cover the reduction and ask for the Sacratio."

I **contemplate** exactly where "down" is. *I've been advised to head toward Hades? My feet? How can this possibly get me closer to my **elusive** bus stop?*

It is an appropriate beginning to my relationship with the Italian bus system. On the bus, nothing is simple. Strategies must be **devised** for **obtaining** seats before glitter-sporting adolescents snatch them. **Deference** must be shown to grandmothers who can no longer drive. And if possible, one always wants a good view of the driver, who never fails to entertain.

A month later, with my bus routine firmly established, I am more familiar with the ins and outs of legendary bus number nine. If one takes the 7:15 bus, which arrives at its destination at 7:50 having covered a **scarce** three miles, one should expect to be respectfully spooned for at least a quarter of the ride.

One can maintain a **semblance** of personal space until the **gaggle** of **boisterous** school-goers boards around 7:30. Ranging from 10-18 years old, they have no concept of volume, and do not realize that their backpacks are an extension of themselves. As a result, it's not unusual to be repeatedly smacked in the stomach (or the face, in my vertically-challenged case), depending on the age of the inattentive wearer.

Perplexed - Confused; baffled

Steals - Move somewhere quietly

Enigmatic - Confusing; mysterious

Contemplate - Think about; consider

Elusive - Difficult to find

Devised - Come up with; planned

Obtaining - Getting

Deference - Respect; priority

Scarce - A small amount

Semblance - The appearance of (esp. when the reality is different)

Gaggle - A flock of geese; a disorderly group of people

Boisterous - Noisy; energetic; rowdy

In an effort to avoid these **inadvertent** beatings, one subconsciously tries to occupy the least amount of space possible, but unfortunately most Italians only see your **void** as more space *they* can occupy.

Searching for a seat at this point would be **futile**, so one must find the least offensive-smelling person for the final **component** of the drive. If you've managed to avoid full-body contact thus far, it will be impossible to maintain once the whistling bus driver takes a speed bump at a casual 30 mph.

Yet we **plebs** are not the only ones with a lack of personal space. A crowd of **fawning** females **perpetually** encircles the emperor of the bus, though at first I do not understand why.

In America, the **taciturn** bus driver would sit on the other side of a bright red line. Riders would be warned with signs and fines not to cross, and few would care to in any case.

Yet here, I consistently see made-up and boot-wearing women falling over themselves in an effort to speak with the motorist. I decide to unearth the mystery behind the women's not-so-secret adoration, and the drivers' easy **affability**.

I begin my study with the drivers themselves, who alternate route-to-route and bus-to-bus, leaving me **ample** opportunity to sample their population. Age is quickly ruled out as a determining factor. The youngest is in his twenties; the oldest in his sixties, yet they all receive the same treatment. Hair color, state of teeth, and chubbiness factor all vary, as well.

Inadvertent - Accidental

Void - Empty space

Futile - Pointless

Component - Part of a larger whole

Plebs - Short for "plebeians," an ancient Latin word for "commoner"

Fawning - Displaying excessive flattery or attention

Perpetually - Constantly

Taciturn - Quiet; uncommunicative

Affability - The quality of being friendly or good-natured

Ample - Plenty (of)

The only theme that remains constant is a carefree approach to life and the road. Light hands turn the steering wheel as the bus comes within inches of nearby cars/ pedestrians/bikers. My own knuckles, by contrast, are often white around my pink iPod as I watch the **perils** of our daily route with a mixture of horror and fascination.

I eventually come to realize that Italians do follow traditional laws of the road. Rather, they put themselves in positions where, if the other car doesn't yield, an accident will **inevitably ensue**. I ALWAYS close my eyes at four way stops.

Yet the drivers remain calm and detached, taking risks as if they were driving the bus from a computer screen. I come to realize that this mix of humor and detachment, combined with the power to control such a monstrous vehicle, is the mysterious charm that **enthralls** bus-riding women.

The drivers are the heart and soul of the bus system. These men — who undoubtedly blow-dry their hair in the morning like all good Italians — take risks most sixteen-year-olds wouldn't dream of, and they do it with ease and skill. They transform the bus from a **mundane** event into a **spectacle**, where excitement mingles with fear and fascination. For bored middle-aged women, these men are like gods. I often sit in my **coveted** bus seat thanking God I was able to **decipher** Sabrina's **cryptic** text.

Perils - Dangers

Inevitably - Unavoidably

Ensnue - Happen; occur

Enthralls - Fascinates or captures the attention of

Mundane - Boring; lacking excitement

Spectacle - A performance or play

Coveted - Desired or envied

Decipher - Succeed in understanding or interpreting something

Cryptic - Mysterious or difficult to understand

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