

Welcome to New York and welcome to Beijing

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US v CHINA: China is racing ahead of the US in many ways but a comparison of the countries' transport systems provides a metaphor for just how fast it is moving, writes **FRANK MCDONALD**

A CITY IS ONLY as good as its transit system. That's what New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) says in one of its numerous self-serving adverts in the subway. And it's a slogan that can be put to the test by using public transport, and then comparing what's on offer in the Big Apple to another world financial capital - Shanghai. Any American visiting Shanghai must be gobsmacked, and even slightly terrified, by its modernity. You arrive at Pudong International Airport and take the Maglev train into the city, travelling at a top speed of 431km an hour on this smoothest of rollercoaster rides. The 37km trip is done in just seven minutes, and then you complete your journey by metro or taxi.

Contrast that with arriving at JFK in New York. Sure, the relatively new driverless Air Train is impressive but it only goes as far as Jamaica Station, way out in Queens. You have a choice then between the Long Island Railroad to Penn Station or the subway's E line - either the Queens Boulevard Express or the Eighth Avenue Local. It's not good at all.

If you take the subway, you descend in an elevator into the Stygian gloom of Sutphin Boulevard-Archer Avenue station. Not only is it badly lit but the slatted, grey plastic ceiling is both filthy and leaking, with rainwater forming a pool on the platform. There's also an incessant background noise - the clunk-clunk-clunk of a creaking escalator.

You wait and wait. An Eighth Avenue Local trundles in and you think you're being clever to hang on for an express train. But none comes along. Some 15 minutes later,

another local train arrives and you have no option but to take it. Then it stops everywhere between there and Manhattan, taking at least 45 minutes to get to 53rd Street and Lexington Avenue.

You try to call or text your friends to tell them you're running late but there's no reception on your trusty mobile. "Cell phones" don't work anywhere on the New York City subway system, because they haven't wired it with transmitters.

It is also frustrating that most New York subway stations - including Sutphin Boulevard-Archer Avenue - don't provide any advance passenger information about when the next train is due.

Some improvements are being made, however. After decades of running "as slow as snails", as the New York Times put it, buses finally got dedicated lanes in Manhattan only last October; these rapid bus transit routes on First and Second avenues (with more to follow elsewhere) are being marketed as "Select Bus Services". Once clogged by cars, trucks and taxis, all honking their horns, the two avenues were to get exclusive bus lanes to speed up travel from Houston Street to 125th Street, "a trip that can last an hour and a half - the length of an Amtrak ride from Pennsylvania Station to Philadelphia", as reporter Michael M Grynbaum observed.

But New Yorkers are so unaccustomed to the idea of "European-style" bus lanes that the MTA has had to install traffic cameras along each route to catch drivers using them as short-cuts or parking areas. The fixed penalty is \$115 (€86), although the police isn't assiduous about issuing tickets; it doesn't seem to take bus lanes seriously.

Manhattan's "transit-starved" East Side has been waiting 80 years for the Second Avenue Subway. First mooted in 1929, the 13km route is finally being constructed with a tunnel-boring machine after several fits and starts - at an estimated cost of \$17 billion (€12.7 billion). It had become known in New York as "the line that time forgot". "It's the most famous thing that's never been built in New York City," according to transport campaigner Gene Russianoff. The only other mass transit line on the East Side is the

Lexington Avenue Subway, which carries a daily average of 1.3 million passengers ("riders" in the US). That's more than the entire Washington Metro system.

Meanwhile, Shanghai has one of the world's fastest-growing metro systems, with 12 lines (all built since 1995) and plans for another eight by 2020. By then, the total length of the system will extend to nearly 900km, making it the world's largest. With 268 stations and 420km of tracks, it already carries seven million passengers a day.

Needless to say, Shanghai has an integrated public transport card that covers metro, buses, ferries and even taxis. You pick up the card at any metro station, put any amount of money on it (up to 2,000 yuan, or €226) and the balance is then reduced as you use it. But since the flat fare is only two to four yuan (23 to 46 cent), it would last quite a while.

China has also started building a high-speed mainline rail network. It now takes just 45 minutes to get from Shanghai to Hangzhou, a distance of 165km. Guangzhou to Wuhan, a distance of 1,060km, can be done in just three hours when it used to take 10; the top speed of 350km an hour makes this the world's fastest mainline train.

It's merely the first phase of a much longer, 2,100km, high-speed line between Beijing and Guangzhou. Altogether, China's railway ministry plans to build 16,000km of new high-speed lines linking all of China's principal cities within the next 10 years. By 2012, according to the stunningly ambitious multi-billion euro programme, 13,000km will be finished.

I witnessed this work under way en route between Beijing and Shanghai, a distance of 1,300km. There was nothing wrong with the daytime express train I was on other than the fact that it took nine and a half hours. But the new railway being built alongside, for bullet trains, will see that journey time slashed to just four hours, with an average speed of 329km per hour. Mainline rail journey times in the US are pathetic by comparison. In fact, the most powerful country in the world has just one "high-speed" rail service, Amtrak's Acela Express, running between Boston and Washington DC via New York,

Philadelphia and Baltimore. It averages only 110km per hour, although trains can reach a top speed of 240km per hour on straight stretches.

The 734km trip takes about six and a half hours from end to end. If the line had anything like the new Chinese speeds, it could be done in less than three - or, in the case of New York-Washington, not much more than an hour. That would be so unbelievably attractive that it would almost certainly eliminate dozens of flights operated daily by the likes of Delta, JetBlue and US Airways.

President Barack Obama proposed investing \$8 billion (€6 billion) in high-speed rail as part of his 2009 economic stimulus package. But this has run into ferocious opposition from the Tea Party coalition, whose nominees were elected as governors of Ohio and Wisconsin last November. And they promptly spurned all federal funding for rail projects in the two states.

Egged on by the right-wing Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation, which oppose rail because it might need long-term public subsidy, Ohio's new Republican governor John Kasich branded plans for a high-speed line linking Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati as "one of the dumbest ideas I ever heard" and used his victory speech to announce that the "train is dead".

Such attitudes may also be a cover for protecting vested interests, notably intercity air services - all operated by privately owned companies. And, of course, it doesn't count with guys like Kasich that high-speed trains produce five times less carbon dioxide than planes, per passenger kilometre; they're mostly climate change deniers or sceptics.

China is forging ahead, in alternative energy, railway development and so many other areas. If it resembles any other country in any period, it would, ironically enough, be the US in the late 19th century, when the raw power of American industry stole a march on the rest of the world.

That's what the Chinese are doing now. They can well afford the enormous investment in high-speed rail, metro systems and everything else. After all, they hold a staggering

\$2,500 billion (€1,866 billion) in foreign reserves including €1,300 billion worth of US Treasury bonds.

"You know, of course, that we now own America," as one top Communist Party official recently remarked. China also has a totalitarian regime, with no tolerance for any equivalent of the Tea Party. Whatever its government decides to do gets done.

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