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Comment: Emails from America: Riding on the subway

Is it better than the London Underground?

by Stuart Miles published on 3 July 2009

So this week I've been mostly eating... no really the food here is a whole different subject for a later date. This week I've found myself riding the New York subway quiet a bit, as I jot between meetings, filming Tech Week In View for Megawhat and basically roaming around the Big Apple.

Now while we don't cover transport here at Pocket-lint, well maybe the odd car, I've found that the subway is certainly an interesting subject to spend some time talking about. Why? Well because it's actually very antiquated compared to the London Underground.

Now these emails aren't for a "bashing America" session every time, but it's dawned on me this week that while the New York subway trains are air conditioned - a welcome advantage over the London Tube - the sheer lack of technology elsewhere, is well, rather upsetting, certainly for a gadget fiend like myself.

So let's start with the escalators. The New York subway has them, but they are few and far between, and for most of the time you get stairs, lots of stairs to get you to and from the ground to the platform. The idea of a lift, or elevator, is pretty much unheard of. I am sure there are some dotted here and there, but I've yet to find one.

Then there is the lack of advertising hoardings. In fact there seems to be virtually no adverts on the subway platform at all.

Okay so you get them in the train, but on the platform it seems to be a no go. It's a strange experience not to be sold something every moment you are underground. Like it not, it shows you how advanced the London



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Underground really is when it comes to getting a marketing message across.

Go to Oxford Street station in London for example, and not only will you get interactive digital screens as you descend into the station, but once you are on the platform you'll get projectors firing video at you, Bluetooth enabled adverts that talk to your mobile, and well, a whole host of light fantastic, singing and dancing its way in to your consumer heart.

In New York, you are more likely to jump off a cool train to be met with a blank, barren station platform with little colour (most of them are white) or excitement other than a sign for the exit.

Considering the abundance of advertising on television and the radio here in the US (see last weeks email from America) you can see why I'm slightly puzzled by the lack of consumerism underground. Maybe it's a taboo, a place where you are just allowed to hide behind a book and your iPod (which many people do).

What puzzles me more however, is considering all the advertising that the London Underground carries, all that innovation, all that interactive bamboozling of the mind with messages about beer, about holidays, about, well just about everything, it is still so bloody expensive.

If the New York subway has anything going for it, it is the price. Advertising or no advertising, entry either via a top-up card system that isn't as advanced as the Oyster card or just a regular ticket will cost you \$2 (around £1.40) to anywhere in the subway system regardless of where you are going. Admittedly that \$2 only lasts as long as you stay in the system. Once you exit you've got to pay another \$2 to get back in, but it's considerably cheaper than the £3 or \$4.50 you pay for a zone 1 single in London.

The network isn't as deep underground as London, but it's just as vast taking you from

uptown Manhattan to the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens, so why London has to charge as much as it does makes you wonder where the TFLs priorities lie.

So what have I learned travelling underground in the city they've named twice? It's cheap, it's peaceful and it's cool thanks to those lovely air conditioned trains.

In fact, if it wasn't for the platforms being ridiculously hot and muggy (well it is summer and you can't have everything) it might just have been the next hip place to hang out.

Stuart Miles is currently living in New York setting up the Pocket-lint US office.