Episode Book

EPISODE #5556

Ranking the World's 5 Worst Bus Rides

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SYNOPSIS

Most "worst bus journey" lists just count hours. This one doesn't. Working from a listener's detailed brief, we rank five real long-haul routes by the full stack of misery: duration, facilities, road surface, reliability, border friction, and documented safety record — with extra weight given to journeys that end somewhere utterly ordinary. The rubric matters: a sixty-hour highway haul with reclining seats is a nap with scenery, while a thirty-hour unpaved mountain run on bench seats is a different genre of human experience. Along the way we dig into the gap between the published timetable and what the ticket seller quietly tells you when you ask twice, why the loss of agency at a border post is worse than any physical discomfort, and why the people on these buses are farmers and students and hospital-bound families — not adventure tourists. It's a countdown, but it's really a conversation about what makes travel genuinely hard.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Okay. I've been on a lot of buses, and I want to say up front that I love them. Which is exactly why this prompt hurts.



Herman

There's a look on your face.



Corn

It's the look of a man about to rank the worst of something he defends. Daniel wrote in this week with a whole brief. He wants five of the worst long-haul bus journeys in the world, judged from the perspective of actually having to sit on the bus until the bitter end. Not the longest. He's explicit about that. He wants the worst combination of extreme journey time, no facilities, bad roads, unreliable service, exhausting borders, and where the evidence supports it, a poor safety record.



Herman

And he wants it specific.



Corn

Very specific. Cities at both ends. Distance. Scheduled time versus realistic time. Bus type. Seating and sleeping arrangements. Toilets, air conditioning, food stops. Road conditions. Breakdown frequency. Safety issues. And then the thing that makes the whole exercise interesting, he says, consider the payoff. A brutal thirty-hour ride through spectacular scenery to somewhere extraordinary has some justification. Give extra weight to the routes where you suffer all of that and arrive somewhere ordinary. Thankless.



Herman

He also ruled out the adventure-tourism stuff.



Corn

Right. No hardship expeditions. Real transport services that real people use to get from A to B. And he wants them ranked, number five being unpleasant but defensible, number one being the most formidable passenger experience on earth. So that's what we're doing.



Herman

Five down to one.



Corn

And I'll say now, I don't think any of these are actually the worst, because the worst ones aren't documented in any language I can read. But we work with what's on the record.



Herman

That's the honest caveat and then we move on.



Corn

We move on.



Herman

Let me set the rubric, because otherwise this is just five anecdotes. The first thing to get straight is that duration is the weakest predictor of misery. A sixty-hour bus on a paved highway with reclining seats and scheduled meal stops is a long nap with scenery. A thirty-hour bus on an unpaved mountain road with bench seats and no toilet is a different category of human experience. So we're weighting comfort, facilities, road surface, reliability, border friction, and safety, and treating time as one input among several.



Corn

And the gap between the timetable and reality.



Herman

That's the truest measure. On a lot of these routes the scheduled time is a work of fiction. You'll see a board that says fourteen hours and the drivers all know it's twenty-two, minimum, because they've budgeted for the breakdown, the checkpoint, and the washout. The published number is marketing. The actual number is what the guy selling tickets quietly tells you when you ask twice.



Corn

So a route that says eighteen hours and takes twenty is honest, and a route that says eighteen and takes thirty-six is a completely different product.



Herman

And the top of this list is where several misery factors stack at once. Duration plus no facilities plus bad roads plus an unreliable vehicle plus a border. Each one multiplies the others. A long trip with a working toilet is bearable. Take the toilet away and add a breakdown and a twelve-hour frontier and you've changed the genre.



Corn

Alright. Number five.



Herman

Number five is La Paz to Rurrenabaque, in Bolivia. Roughly three hundred and fifty kilometers as the crow flies, and the road does not fly, it crawls. The old route went over the Cordillera and down into the Amazon basin, and for years the scheduled time was around eighteen to twenty hours in the dry season. In the wet season, all bets were off. Twenty-four, thirty, occasionally the bus just stopped and everyone slept where they were.



Corn

What's the bus?



Herman

Usually an aging coach, sometimes a converted truck with a canvas back. Bench seating on the cheaper services, no recline, no toilet, no air conditioning that works. You climb from La Paz at around thirty-six hundred meters, over a pass above four thousand, and then descend three thousand meters into tropical heat. So you experience altitude sickness and heatstroke in the same journey, and you change clothes twice on the side of the road.



Corn

And the road itself.



Herman

Unpaved for long stretches. Single lane in places. Cliff on one side, drop on the other. Landslides are routine in the rainy season and the bus waits for a bulldozer that may or may not come that day. Food stops are roadside shacks, and you eat what's there because it's the only thing there.



Corn

So why is this only number five?



Herman

Because of the payoff. You arrive in Rurrenabaque, which is the gateway to the pampas and the jungle, and it is one of the more remarkable places you can end up. Pink river dolphins. Macaws. The whole thing. Daniel's own criterion. Brutal journey, extraordinary destination. It's defensible. You can see why someone does it. I'd do it.



Corn

You'd do it.



Herman

In the dry season. With a friend who speaks Spanish. And a second pair of trousers.



Corn

Number four is where the justification starts to evaporate.



Herman

Number four is a route I'll describe as the anti-payoff. A long, flat, hot haul across a featureless interior to a provincial town that nobody would visit on purpose. The archetype is the trans-Sahel runs, or the long interior routes in northern Nigeria and Niger, or the deep interior of Australia if we want a first-world version. But the purest version of the category is a route like Kano down toward the far south, or the Chad basin routes, where you're looking at eight hundred kilometers of scrub and dust.



Corn

What's the bus?



Herman

An aging coach, often a cast-off from a wealthier country, with seats that were reupholstered once, a decade ago. Air conditioning that either doesn't exist or exists and doesn't work. Windows that open, which is worse, because at sixty kilometers an hour the dust comes in and coats your teeth.



Corn

I've had that. You can feel the grit in your molars.



Herman

You can taste the road. And there is no toilet. There's a scheduled stop every four or five hours at a roadside settlement, and the stop is a patch of ground behind a building. Men go one side, women the other, and everyone pretends not to notice.



Corn

And checkpoints.



Herman

Checkpoints are the defining feature. Police, military, sometimes both, sometimes neither in a uniform. The bus stops, everyone's documents get looked at, sometimes money changes hands, sometimes the bus is held for an hour for no stated reason. On a long interior route you can lose three or four hours to checkpoints alone, and there is nothing anyone can do about it because the driver knows the routine and the passengers know the routine and the routine is the routine.



Corn

And the destination.



Herman

Ordinary. A market town. A regional capital with a bus station and not much else. You have spent twenty-six hours in a metal box breathing dust to arrive somewhere you could have reached by air in ninety minutes if the air service existed, and it doesn't, which is why you're on the bus.



Herman

It's the whole point of the entry. The discomfort is not redeemed by anything. You don't get a story out of it, you get a headache and a receipt.



Corn

Let me push on the safety thing, because we've been soft on it so far.



Herman

The lower entries are uncomfortable rather than dangerous, and I want to be careful not to sensationalize. But on the interior routes the vehicles are old, maintenance is deferred, and the roads are shared with overloaded trucks. The risk is elevated, not catastrophic,



Herman (continued)

but it's there, and it's the kind of risk that passengers accept because the alternative is not traveling.



Corn

Which is the thread that runs through every single one of these.



Herman

Every one.



Corn

Number three.



Herman

Number three is where borders take over the experience. The bus can be perfectly adequate. The road can be paved. The journey is destroyed by the political geography it has to cross. The classic example is a route that traverses multiple West African frontiers, or the Central Asian routes that thread through several former Soviet republics with different customs regimes.



Corn

Give me the shape of it.



Herman

You board in one country. Within a few hours you're at a frontier. Everyone off the bus, into a queue, documents checked, sometimes a fee, sometimes a stamp that takes ninety minutes to get. Back on the bus. Drive four hours. Next frontier. Off again. And each crossing has its own personality, its own pace, its own unofficial charges.



Corn

Twelve-hour delays at a single crossing.



Herman

Documented, and not unusual. There are crossings where the bus arrives at dusk and leaves at dawn, and the passengers spend the night on plastic chairs in a fluorescent room with no food and a toilet that stopped working in a previous decade. And you can't leave, because your passport is in a pile on someone's desk.



Corn

That's the part that gets me. Not the discomfort. The not being able to leave.



Herman

The loss of agency. You have paid for a service and you have no control over when it resumes. And the bus company has no control either, which is the frustrating part, because the driver is as stuck as you are.



Corn

So the misery here is administrative rather than physical.



Herman

It's both. The physical conditions at a border post are often worse than the bus, because the bus at least moves and has a seat. The border has neither. And the uncertainty is the real tax. You don't know if it's two hours or fourteen, and that uncertainty compounds every hour you sit there.



Corn

Number two.



Herman

Number two is where the road itself becomes the adversary. Unpaved mountain tracks. Landslide-prone passes. River crossings where the bus waits for the water to drop. Sections that close for days after rain. And a bus that is mechanically marginal, so the breakdowns are frequent and documented.



Corn

Name the archetype.



Herman

The high passes of the Andes, the interior routes of Papua, the mountain roads of Nepal and northern Pakistan. The kind of route where the scheduled time is twenty hours and the realistic time is anywhere from twenty to fifty, because the variable isn't traffic, it's geology.



Corn

And the bus.



Herman

Often a four-wheel-drive truck with a passenger box welded on. Bench seats. No toilet, obviously. Luggage on the roof, sometimes passengers on the roof, which is a safety issue in its own right. The driver is also the mechanic, because there is no other mechanic, and when something breaks he gets out with a wrench and a hammer and does what he can.



Corn

And when he can't.



Herman

Then you wait. Sometimes at a village, sometimes at a bend in the road with a cliff on one side. And the wait is not measured in hours, it's measured in whether another vehicle comes along that can take you, and whether the driver is willing to, and whether there's



Herman (continued)

space.



Corn

So arrival time varies by a day.



Herman

By a day. By two days. There are routes where the published schedule is a suggestion and the actual arrival is a distribution curve with a long tail. And the passengers on these routes are not adventurers. They're farmers going to market, students going home, people visiting family, people going to a hospital in the city because the village clinic can't help.



Corn

That's the thing I keep coming back to. The people on these buses are not doing it for fun.



Herman

Not one of them.



Corn

Number one.



Herman

Number one is the compounding case. Every misery factor at once, and they amplify each other. Extreme duration. No facilities. Bad roads. Unreliable service. Exhausting borders. And a safety record that is documented and poor.



Corn

Give me the profile.



Herman

Think of a route that crosses a continent's interior, or a route that crosses several frontiers in a region with active instability. The bus is overcrowded, sometimes with standing passengers in the aisle, sometimes with passengers sitting on the floor between the seats. No toilet, or a toilet that is a bucket behind a curtain. No air conditioning, or air conditioning that failed in a previous country. Seating is whatever was in the vehicle when it was purchased, which is often a cast-off from a wealthier operator two owners ago.



Corn

And the road.



Herman

Unpaved for long sections. Potholes that the driver steers around rather than through, which means the bus is constantly swerving, which means nobody sleeps. River crossings without bridges. Sections that flood. And the delays are measured in days, not hours, because a breakdown on a remote stretch means waiting for a part that has to come from a city that is itself a day away.



Corn

And the border.



Herman

Multiple borders, each with its own delay, each with its own unofficial costs. And on the routes that cross regions with active conflict, the security situation changes month to month and the bus company adjusts the route accordingly, which means the published route and the actual route may not be the same thing.



Corn

And the safety record.



Herman

This is where I want to be careful, because I'm not going to name a specific route and claim a specific crash statistic I can't verify. But the pattern is documented across several regions. Overloaded vehicles, deferred maintenance, night driving on unlit roads, mountain passes without barriers. The combination is what makes the record poor, not any single factor.



Corn

And the destination.



Herman

Ordinary. A regional town. A border city. Somewhere with a bus station and a market and not much else. You have spent three days in a metal box and you have arrived somewhere you have no particular reason to be, except that it's where the bus goes and you needed to go there.



Corn

So the number one entry is the one where the suffering buys you nothing.



Herman

It buys you arrival. That's the transaction. And for the people on that bus, arrival is the whole point, because the alternative is not going.



Corn

Which is the uncomfortable heart of this whole episode. These aren't adventures. They're the only option.



Herman

They're infrastructure. Bad infrastructure, but infrastructure. And that's why they persist.



Hilbert

I agree with all of it. I'd just add one thing, which is the driver.



Corn

Go on.



Hilbert

I spent eighteen months dispatching for a small co-op. Regional routes, nothing continental. But the thing nobody understands from the outside is that on a lot of these services the driver is the mechanic, the baggage handler, the ticket inspector, and the person who decides whether to keep going. There's no operations center. There's no one to call. He looks at the water on the road and he makes a call.



Herman

And that call is the difference between a bad trip and a dangerous one.



Hilbert

We had a route that crossed a low section, and in the wet season it flooded. Not deep, maybe two feet at the worst point. And the rule was you wait. But waiting meant missing the connection at the other end, which meant forty people stranded overnight, which meant the co-op ate the cost. So there was pressure. And one driver, good driver, twenty years on that route, decided to go through. And the water was deeper than it looked because the roadbed had washed out underneath. The bus went in at an angle and stopped. Everyone got out through the windows. Nobody drowned. But it was close, and it was close because a man had to make a decision in about four seconds with forty people behind him.



Corn

What happened to him?



Hilbert

He kept driving. Not on that route, they moved him. But he kept driving for another decade. He was good. That's the thing. He was good and he still made that call, because the pressure to make the schedule was real and he'd made the crossing a hundred times and it had always been fine.



Herman

That's the trap. The hundred successful crossings teach you the wrong lesson.



Hilbert

Every time. And the co-op couldn't fix it because the co-op had no money. The margin on that route was about nothing. We ran it because the villages needed it, and we ran it at a loss, and we subsidized it from the profitable routes, and the profitable routes were getting less profitable. So there was no money for new buses, no money for driver training, no money for anything except diesel and wages.



Corn

So the economics explain the whole list.



Hilbert

They explain everything. You can't invest in comfort when you're not covering costs. And you can't raise fares because the passengers can't pay more. So you run old buses on bad roads with tired drivers and you hope. That's the business.



Herman

And the toilet situation.



Hilbert

We had one bus with a toilet. It was a bucket behind a curtain. And the instruction was you use it while the bus is moving, because when it's stationary the smell fills the whole cabin. So you had people standing up, holding the curtain, trying to use a bucket while the bus went around a corner. I don't know how anyone managed it. But they did, because the alternative was waiting four hours for the next stop.



Corn

That is the single most cursed sentence I have heard this year.



Hilbert

It worked. That's all I'll say. It worked.



Herman

The part that gets me is the moving requirement. That's a design decision made by someone who had run out of every other option.



Hilbert

There was no design. There was a bucket and a curtain and a rule. And the rule was written by a man who had smelled the alternative.



Corn

I want to go back to something you said, about the driver being the one who decides. Because that reframes the whole ranking for me. We've been ranking routes, but the actual variable is the person at the wheel.



Hilbert

The route sets the floor. The driver sets where you land above it. Same road, same bus, two different drivers, two completely different journeys. One gets you there tired. The other gets you there scared.



Herman

And the passengers have no say in which one they get.



Hilbert

They buy a ticket and they find out.



Corn

So the worst journey in the world is not a route. It's a route plus a bad day plus a driver who's been on duty too long.



Hilbert

That's the version I'd rank. But nobody publishes that one.



Corn

Before we close, there's one detail from the research I couldn't fit anywhere and it's been bothering me.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

The gap between scheduled and realistic time isn't just a function of breakdowns. On a lot of these routes the schedule is set by the ticket office, not by the operations team, because the ticket office knows that a fourteen-hour journey sells better than a twenty-two-hour journey. So the number on the board is a sales document. The drivers know the real number. The passengers find out.



Herman

And the drivers are the ones who absorb the anger when the bus arrives six hours late.



Corn

Every time.



Herman

So we've ranked five, and the honest summary is that the rankings are subjective and the conditions change. A route that's terrible this year might get a new road, or might lose its only operator, or might get worse because a border closes. None of this is fixed.



Corn

And the thing underneath all five is the same thing. Nobody on these buses chose the hardship. They chose to get where they needed to go, and this was the only way there.



Herman

Which is the part that should sit with people. The next time your flight is delayed two hours and you're annoyed about it, somewhere there's a person on hour nineteen of a bus with no toilet and no arrival time and no alternative.



Corn

That's the episode. This has been My Weird Prompts. Hilbert Flumingtop produces the show. If you enjoyed it, leave us a review wherever you listen, it helps other people find us.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you then.