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# Go by Transit! Out-of-Town Adventures on Local Public Transportation

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# GO BY TRANSIT!

## Out-of-town adventures on local public transportation

by Linn Davis

Every mode of transportation has its great travel story. There are the steamships, railroads, and elephants of Jules Verne's 80-day circumnavigation. And there are the hot air balloons Hollywood added 80 years later. There are Cousteau's submarines and Lawrence of Arabia's camels. There are the freight trains Jack London hopped as a teenage hobo in his memoir, *The Road*. And in Kerouac's *On the Road*, there's everything from a '47 Cadillac Limousine to the back of a flatbed truck careening across west Nebraska in the middle of the night.

William Least Heat-Moon took a cross-country road trip in a green Econoline van; Steinbeck took one in a green pickup truck camper he called Rocinante, after Don Quixote's horse. Heck, count the horse too. There's Che's motorcycle and his *Diaries*. And the hiking boot Cheryl Strayed cathartically threw off a cliff. There's Huck Finn's raft and the one the *Kon-Tiki* crew sailed 4,000 miles across the South Pacific. There are the Freedom Riders' buses. And Saint-Exupéry's planes. And Peter Jenkins' 40 pairs of

worn shoes. And the single-speed bicycle Dervla Murphy rode all the way from Dunkirk to Delhi in 1963—she named it Rozinante, with a “z.”

But where oh where are the travel sagas on local public transit? Where is the city-bus-as-epic-adventure-steed?

Yes, I can hear your scoffing right through these pages. And I see your point: local transit is by definition high on quotidian practicality and low on wild expeditioning. But the fact is, you can get quite far on rural public transit (and I'm not counting Amtrak, Greyhound, or other primarily long-distance services here), and it can make for as much of a story as a voyage across the Pacific or a *Walk Across America*.

What's more, many of these trips are easy to do. Forget the trekker's pack or hobo's bundle—there are plenty of places anyone can go with a modicum of preparation and a minimum of tolerance for the unexpected. This spring, I took two such transit adventures to small towns at the edge of the Portland metro area, simple daytrips that are profiled on the following pages.

*...local transit is by definition high on quotidian practicality and low on wild expeditioning.*

But there are a few brave explorers who are taking this game to the extreme. On a website called [epictransitjourneys.com](http://epictransitjourneys.com), for example, there's one anonymous transit Magellan who has posted a particularly impressive itinerary—one that claims it can take intrepid riders from North Bend, Oregon, to Los Angeles via 11 local transit trips. This one is an outlier, though: not only does it take four days and go several hundred miles out of the way to Reno in order to make its connections, but, according to the website, it also costs a whopping \$193.75 (well more than twice the Greyhound fare).

Most local rural transit, by contrast, is dirt cheap—often far cheaper than any other motorized mode of travel—and, while rarely competitive time-wise with driving, it usually doesn't veer far off course. For example, it's possible to get from Portland to The Dalles or from Portland to Salem on local transit in only 30 percent more time than it takes to drive—and for only \$8 and \$5.50, respectively.

Besides, speed is most certainly not the point.

What local transit offers is the chance to journey at a purposefully slower pace, the chance to see those intermediate places that may not be conspicuously spectacular but that reveal the natural fabric of daily life in a way we'd never see from a car. And it is just those “unspectacular” places that are often the most genuinely intriguing and, indeed, the most inadvertently spectacular.

And that goes for people, too. The people Kerouac rides with on that flat-bed truck—the high school jocks, the kindly tramp, the polite North Dakotan farm boys driving like Mr. Toad: those are not embellished characters. Add in the kissy couples, the single moms, the weary commuters, the lost foreign tourists, and

think of all the people we're not meeting when we travel only in cars with our own friends.

But there are other reasons to use rural transit. It's not only a financial bargain but also an environmental one, at least when compared to driving. And there is a dimension of social responsibility here as well. People all across this spread-out country depend on rural public transit to get around, and these are often among our most vulnerable fellow residents: the young, old, disabled, and low-income; people of color, recent immigrants, and non-English speakers. While rural areas have fewer people in some of these groups than cities (e.g., people living in poverty, people of color), they have substantially higher populations of elderly and disabled Americans. According to the Census, 16.4 percent of rural residents are over 65 (compared to 13.1 percent in urban areas), and 14.9 percent are living with a disability (compared to 11.7 percent in cities).

If some degree of mobility is a basic human right (and it is)—and if the only source of mobility for some people is scheduled transit service (and it is)—then higher ridership on those routes means a higher chance they'll be available to everyone in perpetuity. And as far as small transit systems are concerned, “in perpetuity” is at constant risk. As with any service, the more limited the revenue streams, the greater the vulnerability in the face of budget shortfalls, customer variations, or political whims.

Even so, rural transit does appear to be improving.

According to the Rural Transit Fact Book, 79 percent of US counties were at least partially served by some form of local public transit as of 2013, and that number has risen consistently each year since 2008. Moreover, Oregon and

*It's not only a financial bargain but also an environmental one...*

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Washington beat the national average: in Oregon, 31 of 36 of counties are served by transit, up from 28 counties in 2008; in Washington, 35 of 39 of counties are served, up from just 24 counties.

But that's a blunt statistic. Just because transit systems exist doesn't mean they aren't severely limited in their operating hours, frequency, or geographic coverage—they're often limited in all three. And it doesn't mean they're actually connected to each other—sometimes you can get all the way to Los Angeles, sometimes not even to the next town. For people who depend on these services as their only source of independent mobility, those limitations can be thoroughly isolating.

Therefore, perhaps even city slickers have a responsibility to support rural transit, not just with our tax dollars but also with our fares. And as transit becomes an increasingly viable means of out-of-town adventure, that should become ever easier.

To that end, this article showcases a couple of transit-accessible destinations at the edge of the Portland metro region, in the hope that you too may be inspired to look for inadvertently spectacular places and acquaintances—and to see local transit as a viable mode of intercity exploration.

Perhaps even one worth writing a novel about.

## Gaston Travelogue

**M**y first public transit adventure started off slowly. It was a Saturday, and I woke up late—noon or something slovenly. I had just bought a bike, an old early-'80s thing with blue polka-dot handlebars and rust up one side and down the other, and I thought I'd try out a combined transit-bike trip (Option 2, at right).

That said, the same journey can be done exclusively on transit (Option 1, at right) and in much less time—but only on weekdays. And note: Bus 33 makes no intermediate stops between the east side of Forest Grove and Gaston, so visiting downtown Forest Grove will require a transfer (see map).

MAX was cool and quiet, and those newer trains even have seats with a little lumbar support. Very nice. I switched to the bus, and we passed through Cornelius—home to one of the region's first Sonic Drive-Ins, the retro burger chain with the cult following and the servers on roller skates—and into Forest Grove.

Cornelius may have the skates, but Forest Grove has the rest of 1950s Americana: a bucolic college campus on a hill, a main street movie theater, a corner café named after its owner (Connie) and known for its milkshakes. There's a strip of shops and sidewalk cafés, and then the bus comes to a stop and that's the end of the line.

I got on my bike and planned a route that would keep me off the main highway as much as possible—there's a very wide shoulder, it's safe, and Google thinks it's the route you should take, but it's no fun. There is a half-mile segment where the new highway is your only choice, but for the rest of it, Old Highway 47 and the other back roads connecting to it are by far the best way to go. And bring a good map or charge your phone beforehand, as this bike route isn't a straight shot.

By bus or bike, the trip from Forest Grove to Gaston is beautiful. Given my late start and several afternoon errands, the light was fading, and the landscape

*Cornelius may have the skates, but Forest Grove has the rest of 1950s Americana...*

## Portland to Gaston

### Option 1:

**Travel time:** 85 mins.

**Distance:** 29.6 miles

**Operates:** YTCA Bus 33 to Gaston only runs Mon.-Fri.

**Cost:** \$3.75 each way (or \$7.50 for unlimited day passes on both agencies)

1. Get on TriMet MAX Blue Line toward Hillsboro
2. Get off at Hillsboro Central Station
3. Get on Yamhill County Transit Area (YCTA) Bus 33 toward McMinnville
4. Get off in Gaston (Hwy 47 & Park St.)

Last Bus 33 leaving Gaston: 5:58 p.m.

### Option 2:

**Travel time:** 80 mins. (transit) + 40 mins. (bike)

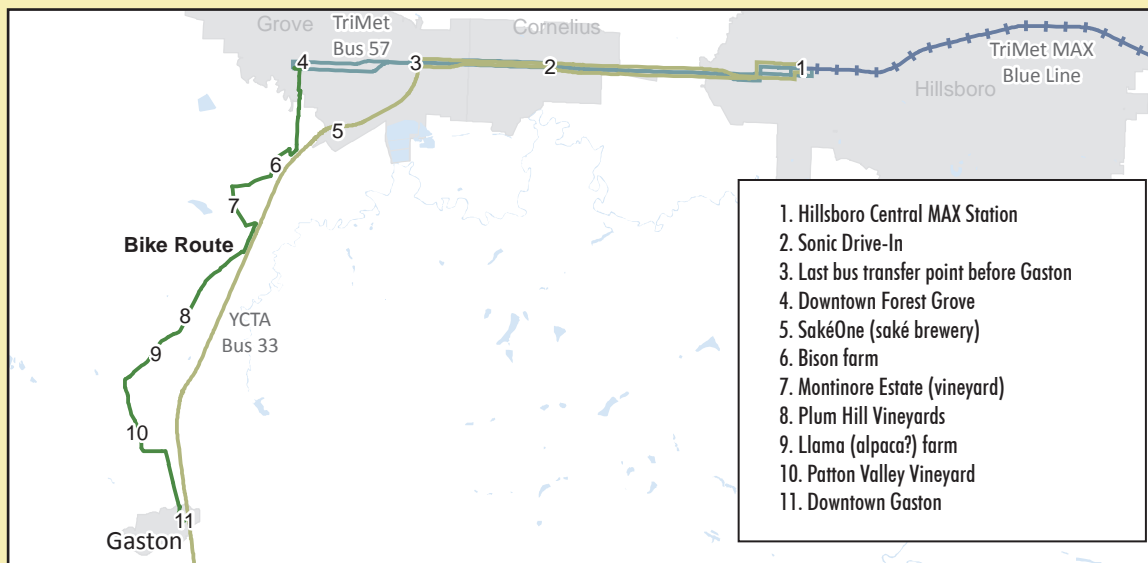
**Distance:** 24.1 miles (transit) + 7.6 miles (bike)

**Operates:** Every day

**Cost:** \$2.50 each way (or \$5 for a TriMet day pass)

1. Get on TriMet MAX Blue Line toward Hillsboro
2. Get off at Hillsboro Central Station
3. Get on TriMet Bus 57 toward Forest Grove
4. Get off in Forest Grove off at 19th and B St. (the end of the line/turnaround point)

Last Bus 57 leaving Forest Grove (that connects to MAX): 12:06 a.m.



was magical. Brick-red barns on deep green fields below a shimmering moon in the dusk. Birds chirping, wind rustling, no cars in sight—just a gently rolling strip of asphalt stretching out among those lilted hills.

I stopped momentarily to watch some bison by the roadside. A sign on the fence instructs curious humans to keep their hands to themselves. A little ways along, another stop: llamas (or alpacas?).

I pulled out my map and noticed I had passed pretty close to a saké brewery and three different wineries. I suddenly realized something, this would make a perfect transit-bike-wine-tasting trip.

I arrived in Gaston at nightfall and looked around. This is no tourist town; it's a self-sufficient place with its own school district and one of everything. There's the obligatory feed and hardware store, the greasy spoon (the Screamin'



Chicken Diner), and the funky old Gaston Market—a.k.a., “Ralph’s ‘Pretty Good’ Grocery,” according to lettering on the side of the building. And there’s a bar, of course, the One Horse Tavern. I was parched and famished, so I went in.

One of the world’s greatest things is small town night life, and the tavern here didn’t disappoint. Good grub, an outdoor patio, knickknacks all around, comfy booths, and barkeepers so friendly they even offered me a ride back to Forest Grove. I just had to wait till closing time, they said. No complaint there, I said.

### Molalla Travelogue

Another Saturday, another trip—this time out toward my homeland, rural Clackamas County. Faithful travel partner Lina agreed to go with me, and so out we went—out to Milwaukie, then south along the old highway to California, McLoughlin Boulevard.

Most would say the first part of this trip is less than scenic, that it’s just several long miles of car lots. But look between the cars, and you’ll find a western wear store with a giant cowboy boot over its sign and a life-size horse over its entrance, a Coney Island hot-dog place with an extra-long neon wiener dog on its roof, and a thrift store called Red White & Blue that has to be the cheapest and most cavernous old-school thrift shop in the metro area.

Beyond the sunbathers on the Clackamas River comes Oregon City, which boasts a new riverfront walk, a revitalized Main Street, and an ambitious plan for its side of Willamette Falls (see *Metroscape’s* Winter 2015 issue). If you have a layover at Clackamas Community College, like we did, head to the beautiful old growth trees to the north of the bus stop or the man-made bubbling brook to the southeast. We saw three toads there (or frogs?). I’m obviously not much of a zoologist here.

On the bus to Molalla, the road narrows, and the farmland begins. I’m always surprised



Downtown Forest Grove



Countryside on the way to Gaston



Local produce outlets



The One Horse Tavern in Gaston

## Portland to Molalla

**Travel time:** 95 mins.

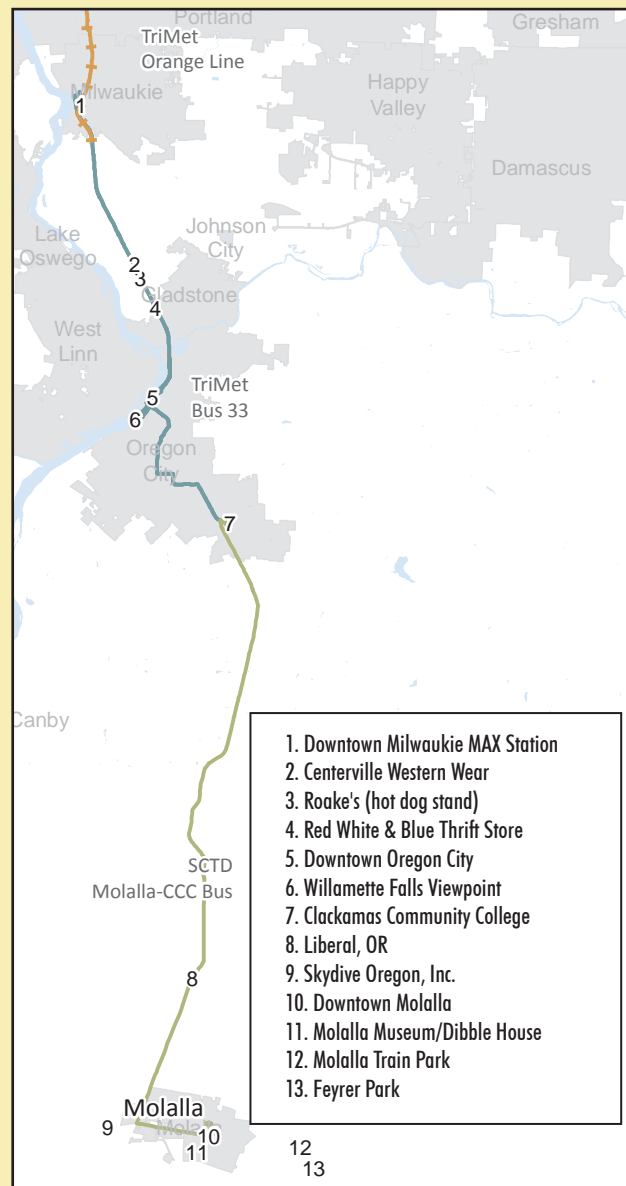
**Distance:** 33 miles

**Operates:** The SCTD bus to Molalla only runs Mon.-Sat.

**Cost:** \$3.50 each way (or \$5 for an unlimited TriMet day pass + \$1 each way on SCTD = \$7)

1. After TriMet's MAX Orange Line opens Sept. 12, 2015: Take the Orange Line toward Milwaukie, get off at the Downtown Milwaukie station, and switch to TriMet Bus 33 there. Before the Orange Line opens: Take TriMet Bus 33 directly from downtown Portland
2. Get on TriMet Bus 33 toward Clackamas Community College (CCC)
3. Get off at Clackamas Community College
4. Get on the SCTD (South Clackamas Transportation District) bus toward Molalla
5. Get off in Molalla at W. Main St. and Hart St. (catch the return bus immediately across W. Main St. from here, at the northwest corner of W. Main St. and Kennel Ave.)

Last Bus leaving Molalla: 7:34 p.m. (Mon.-Fri.);  
4:00 p.m. (Sat.)



how the air changes out in the country—like a country-scented air freshener but more, well, authentic. I had considered stopping in Liberal, Oregon, a crossroads named (according to local lore, apparently) after the liberal credit once given by the local store. That store is still in business, and there's also a working saw mill here, a shady riverside park that would be perfect for a picnic, and a couple of pubs. But all that would have to wait for another trip.

The bus makes a loop through downtown Molalla, so you can't miss it. It's a dusty, rugged-looking downtown—patently Western but without

looking like a movie set—and that makes sense. After all, Molalla is home to one of western Oregon's largest professional rodeos, the Molalla Buckaroo, which has been lighting up the town's 4th of July weekend for 102 years.

Along with several restaurants—including a tantalizing outdoor BBQ place—downtown Molalla has everything a cowboy would need: a couple of bars, a gun shop, a men's clothing store, a Mexican grocery, and a saddle shop. We headed straight to the saddle shop, of course, where—true to form—the owner was mending a saddle as we walked in. They have a backlog of repairs,



The Hitchin' Post in Molalla



Greenstone Event Center



Molalla's Flat Iron Saddlery



Dibble House Museum

he said, because they're the only saddlery for miles.

After breathing in that good leather smell for awhile—and trying on several pairs of very nice work boots—we walked over to the city museum, a couple of rustic old houses housing a veritable wagon-load of artifacts. While it's officially only open Fridays and Saturdays 1-4 p.m., one of the friendly volunteers said (incredibly) that she lives just down the street and could walk over and give a quick tour almost any day of the year, with a little warning. It's free, but a small donation would certainly be kind. Look for more info on their Facebook page, under "Molalla Area Historical Society."

We wandered some more, relaxed for a bit, and headed back to the bus—the last one leaves Molalla at only 4 p.m. on Saturdays, sadly.

But I've already planned my next visit. And no, it won't include skydiving, though that is an option (see [skydiveoregon.com](http://skydiveoregon.com)).

First, I'll get a bite at the top-rated Mexican restaurant on Main Street, El Charrito, then set out on a 50-minute trek east of town to Feyrer Park, which is set on a picturesque bend of the Molalla River. After a nap there, I'll walk a few minutes up the road to the—and I can hardly contain my five-year-old self here—Molalla Train Park! Yes, that's an exclamation point.

The Molalla Train Park (free admission)

is a place for grown adults to share their love of rideable miniature trains. Oh sure, they may be only two feet off the ground, but some of them are as detailed as the real thing—complete oil-burning steam engines in some cases. Since the CCC-to-Molalla bus only runs Monday through Saturday and the Train Park is only open on Sundays (1-5 p.m.) during the summer, this would appear to be a lost cause for the transit-adventurous. But fear not! For just \$50, you can rent the park for three hours on any Saturday for up to 25 of your closest friends. Hello, 30th birthday party. Plus, check their website ([pnls.org](http://pnls.org)) for other special non-Sunday events throughout the summer.

For now, though, we were homeward bound, but we weren't quite ready to call it a day. In Oregon City, we got off the #33 just before it turned the corner onto McLoughlin Boulevard up on the bluff. There are two pubs there, one with a patio view of Willamette Falls. We had a bite, and then crossed the highway for a better view. The river, the town, the bridge, the old rusting paper mills, and the enormous pummeling falls make for one of the most photogenic vistas in the metro area. It's a truly spectacular sight—and this time, I mean "spectacular" in a very conspicuous sort of way. **M**

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