A Coronavirus (Not Yet) Ground Zero Report: The NYC Subway

By Josh Bloom — March 5, 2020

The New York City subway system, which is a rather gruesome venue on a good day, would seem to be a good place to avoid during these coronavirus times. Nonetheless, yours truly ventured down there recently. In the mood for a trip report? All aboard!

Riding the New York City subway is a rather gruesome experience on a good day. And there is no such thing as a good day. They are all bad or worse.

I've managed to avoid the wretched thing since the Wuhan coronavirus outbreak, but today I had no choice. Following is my trip report. I hope it goes viral.

1. The Dreaded 6 Train
Stepping onto a 6 is like stepping into some kind of Alice In Wonderland portal where everything's a little smaller and pushed closer together. Every New York City Subway Line Ranked [1]

New Yorkers have long been passionately arguing about which of the 36 lines that "serve" the city is the worst. It is an argument that will be going on long after peace arrives in the Middle East. My personal "favorite" is the 6 train. I hate the 6 train at the molecular level.

Many maintain that the 7 is the worst, and although I disagree I still have to give them points because this is the train that takes you to Citifield to see the Mets - an experience that is arguably as bad as the ride.

Photos: (Left) Mets fans. 34 years since the last championship. And counting. (Right) The hideous 7 train. Wall Street Journal [2]/AP (Right) The Subway Nut [3]

Report:

- The 6 was less than half full. This itself is astounding since it's normally hard enough to stuff a crouton into the damn thing.
- No masks. One minor cough. No one seemed to care.
- Estimation of face-touching – 20%
2. The Horrendous L Train

The L train is one of the most popular trains to ride. It’s also one of the most popular to complain about online. It breaks down plenty, it’s always packed, the AC is broken in half the cars, and if you don’t hang on for dear life when it careens under the East River, you’ll be sent flying into the nearest group of angry teens.

The L train was bad enough until 2019 when the Transit Authority announced a “slowdown,” a concept that must be the transportation equivalent of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, challenging the concept of "slow." It has been called "the worst train in the world." [4] Obviously by someone who never took the 6.

Report:

- Unlike the 6, the L was crowded (1), which isn’t that surprising, since a train arrives approximately once every leap year.
- Mood on the train: total indifference
- No coughing
- No masks
- Estimation of face-touching – less than 10%
- One disturbing outlier: A woman kept sticking her right index finger in her mouth, and I don’t mean just a little. It appeared that she couldn’t remember whether she still had her tonsils and felt compelled to check every 30 seconds. Eww.

The Apporitional Z Train

The Z train is a myth to many, but admit it: when it does show up, you can’t help
but get kind of excited.

As advertised, the arrival of the Z did seem to elicit a rather otherworldly response as it pulled into the station. Was it really there or was it just an illusion?

Could this be the ghostly Z Train emerging from the mist? Photo: J. Alex Lang [6]

It was really there. I think.

Report:

- The train was mostly empty. Except, perhaps, for invisible apparitions.
- **Three masks** - the only three I noticed on the entire trip.
- Mood: Dreamlike state, perhaps because the other passengers, real or not, couldn't believe that they were actually on the mystical Z train.
- Face touching - none
- No coughing

Urban legend has it that the Z was, in fact, named after the rock group ZZ Top.
There may be something to this legend after all. I did notice a goodly number of people sprouting healthy beards. Especially the women.

Executive Summary:

- NYC subway riders seemed to be absolutely unconcerned about the coronavirus, which is odd because if nothing else New Yorkers are among the most neurotic inhabitants of the planet.
- But, when it hits the city – and it will, sooner rather than later, the subways, and maybe the entire city will probably look more like this...

Waiting for the Z train in post-coronavirus times? Photo: Stacy Fortson

- Most surprising was the absence of masks. I expected to see plenty.
- Nah, check that. It was the absence of panhandlers on the 6. Where did they go? West Palm?

NOTES:

(1) The term "crowded" on a New York subway train is not a subjective term. It is defined as "when passenger density is such that when 50% of the time an individual sticks out his or her tongue it protrudes into another rider's mouth."

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