



Get on the Microbus

Second in a four-part series about a former Vail resident's work in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Rick Gustafson

May 15, 2006

A very common sight on the roads in Kinshasa is the 1960s version of the Volkswagen Microbus. They chug along the streets; their overloaded struts straining, often unsuccessfully, to keep the fenders from bouncing off the top of the tires as they traverse the pothole-strewn roads of the city of 12 million.

These vehicles come in all colors and conditions. Their once vivid red, orange, or blue color has long since oxidized and faded. In many cases, the original colors have been replaced with primers or any other color of spray paint available. Because there is no bus service in Kinshasa, people crowd into these relics that serve as the primary source of "public" transportation.

The condition of these vehicles ranges from good to barely running. The original interiors have been removed and replaced with removable, wooden benches, which can accommodate more people than the seats that originally came with the vehicle. Many of these vans are windowless and resemble the stripped down commuter train that runs between the city center to the airport 15 miles out of town. The train and the vans look as though passengers have taken revenge for the cramped ride by beating the exteriors with tire irons. Given the style in which most of the people drive, this is not surprising.

There are no designated bus stops or stop ways for these vehicles to pull over to load and unload passengers, so drivers stop haphazardly. If there is no room to pull over because of an open storm drain or crowded market, they will just stop in the street blocking one direction of a two-lane thoroughfare adding to the congestion of the already crowded street. Once all of the benches are loaded with passengers, the van is considered only half full. The drivers continue to randomly pull over to board more passengers who make themselves at home by sitting on the lap of the person who is occupying the bench seat.

Even more seating is available. In the back of the VW Microbus is a small deck above the engine that is accessible through a hatch, which lifts up. This part of the bus is capable of holding three people provided they hang their legs out through the open hatch. This area appears to be prime seating as it is easily accessible when the rest of the car is full.

The last place to load passengers is the step just inside the sliding cargo door. The doors are left open allowing passengers to stand on the step and hang on to the doorframe or roof rack. This location can accommodate up to three people. Occasionally, passengers will even ride on the top.

In addition to the VW vans, there are other types of trucks and vans that have been modified to accommodate passengers. Some cargo vans have ventilating 8-inch diameter circles, resembling portholes, cut out of the side. Another source of transportation is small pickups with oversized racks in the beds to allow the standing passengers to hold on. These trucks are often so over-loaded that they resemble a large mushroom driving down the street. VT



Special to The Vail Trail

The primary source of public transportation in the Democratic Republic of Congo doesn't seem public at all: old vehicles packed to the brim with people. Here, a group of Congolese piled into a dilapidated truck.

[BACK](#) ←