Drivers Brave Traffic Tie-Ups To Travel Solo
Lone commuters revel in isolation, quiet time

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(06-19) 04:00 PST Regional -- Here they are, every weekday morning, hunched bleary-eyed over their steering wheels as they slurp down breakfast and creep-crawl at 1 or 2 miles an hour toward the Bay Bridge tollbooths.

From the perspective of carpooling commuters whizzing past them in the toll-free commute lane, the backup looks like a nightmare.

Thousands of lone drivers, resplendent in their nearly empty cars, have been sitting in line for 15 or 20 minutes, waiting to arrive at the tollbooths and hand over $2, only to wait an additional 10 minutes to clear the metering lights.

And for many of them, it turns out, that is just fine.

Lone commuters are all over the Bay Area, and for many of them, there is no other way to get to work than to drive. Going from Berkeley to Santa Clara? You are a permanent citizen of the Nimitz. San Francisco to San Ramon? Get used to the Caldecott Tunnel; in time, you will come to love it.

But the daily trip from the East Bay to San Francisco offers commuters several choices -- perhaps the most in the Bay Area. Yet the net result is that tens of thousands of commuters simply ignore them in favor of getting to know the inside of their Fords, Lexuses and BMWs as well as they know their living rooms.

Why do they take this stagnant drudgery, day in and day out? Why not take BART or AC Transit or a ferry? If you have to drive, why not collect a couple of riders at the carpool pickup points and save half an hour?

There is no pat answer -- the reasons vary from driver to driver -- but the transportation experts who keep track of such matters say there are a lot of these singular motorists and it...
is clear that many do not particularly mind being sentenced to their automobiles for two
hours a day.

During the peak commute time from 6 a.m. to 9 a.m., about 86,000 drivers, one-third of the
daily East Bay-to-San Francisco commuters, are driving alone and driving very, very slowly.

**MOMENT OF ISOLATION**

But for many of them it is an oasis of calm, a moment of isolation before the hurly-burly of
the workday hits them in the face.

Take Diane Blackwell, for example. When she goes to San Francisco from her home in
Alameda, the self-employed insurance broker is out of her driveway by 5:30 a.m., pointing
her Honda Accord LX toward the bridge.

``Being an insurance broker, I'm very heavily involved with people, and this is the time to
sort out what I'm going to be doing that day," she says. ``I have kind of a self-dialogue; it's
my sanity check, a space-out time."

She is not the only one.

An hour later, attorney Pat Bengtsson leaves Moraga for the 25-mile commute to his office
at Pillsbury Madison & Sutro in San Francisco.

He freely admits he could pick up riders and save some time, but he spends a lot of time
``making East Coast calls" and "if I pick up people, I can't make the calls. It's part of the
commuter carpool etiquette -- no cell-phone calls."

Bengtsson also reasons that, ``I do have the choice to take BART, but I can't make calls (on
the train) and, because it's crowded, I can't sit down. And there's also the time when I want
to be alone for an hour." In his car.

Carpooling and public transit are touted by environmentalists and others as the best ways to
commute in the morning, but sometimes they are nothing but a huge nuisance.

Lone commuters point out that sometimes the line of cars waiting to pick up carpool
passengers is often so long that you could easily spend more time in that line than in the
tollbooth lines.

And BART, while running smoothly most of the time, is invariably packed to the gills during
the morning commute. And when BART breaks down it doesn't do it by half measures --
that's where they get the phrase you keep hearing about BART "creating a bus bridge"
between stations, causing hours of delays.

The less tangible, but perhaps purest reason for solo commuting is that ``for most
commuters, it's absolutely the American way. It's the whole American dream to have the
flexibility and the privacy that you get while you're in your car," says Hani Mahmassani, a
professor of civil engineering at the Center for Transportation research at the University of
The flexibility that people want to have is not well-served by public transit," says Mahmassani, who is also president of the International Association of Travel Behavior and Research, a research group devoted to understanding travel behavior. "In the morning, a lot of people 'trip-chain,' which means they make various stops along the way -- dropping off clothes at the cleaner, dropping off children at school, stopping at a store to buy a paper." And then they get on the freeway and go to work.

This kind of solo-commuting behavior, Mahmassani says, comes at a price, "certainly for society, but also increasingly for the individual, what with congestion, tolls, parking costs and just the cost of owning vehicles."

It is a price people are clearly willing to pay because of what they get in return.

A 'PRIVACY' ISSUE

"A lot of this has to do with privacy, and the sense that when you're in your car, you still have some kind of control over your life," says Alan Pisarski, a former transportation planning executive for the U.S. Department of Transportation and author of the book, "Commuting in America."

"You can smoke a cigarette, you can listen to the music you want to," he said.

Pisarski, who lives in Falls Church, Va., says that when he goes on the lecture and talk show circuit, "I often hear how people see this as one of the few places where they can be themselves, and be alone. Part of the day they're in this little cocoon thing and are in control and are comfortable. And coming home, they see it in many ways as a decompression chamber."

"I get a lot of people, when I'm on talk shows, who say 'This is my time.' My reaction is they're nuts."

But the lure of getting into a car and having an hour or two of cossetted silence sometimes cannot be resisted, even by Pisarski.

"The other day, I had to speak up by Cape Cod, so I flew to Providence and I got a rental car and I drove up, and when I do that, and I'm in the car and I have a 1 1/2-hour drive, that's a very pleasant time for me."

"It's a lone time. You see a bit of America; you compose your thoughts. There's a certain pleasure in that."

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Today’s “Commuter Chronicles” continues a weekly series of stories exploring the practical aspects of transportation and commuting in the Bay Area. Each Monday, the series features articles that get behind the political controversies and real-life vexations that readers face every day on highways and byways, on buses, trains, ferries and BART.

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