Getting Around the City With the Elderly
Anne Kadet finds plenty of travel options

Vincent Blazewicz, who is nearly 90, gets into a car arranged through Access-A-Ride outside his home in Marine Park, Brooklyn. PHOTO: AGATON STROM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By ANNE KADET
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At a class for seniors at Kingsborough Community College, the students got to swapping stories about getting around the city.

Kathleen Connor wasn’t so keen on Uber. Once, trying to contact customer service, she accidentally booked a high-price trip. “My ride from 42nd Street to Bensonhurst was $75,” she said.

Access-A-Ride got dinged for its routing system. “They took me all the way to Queens on the way to lower Manhattan,” said Icemae Gardner, who lives in Brooklyn’s East New York neighborhood. “It was like taking a tour.”

Others complained about subway stairs, traffic and slow buses.

But Vincent Blazewicz, who is nearly 90, said all this beats the alternative. “Most accidents happen in the home,” he said. “We should get out!”

I personally plan to get extravagantly old in New York. The conversation got me curious about how I might get around when my knees give out.

My conclusion? I’m probably better off here than anywhere else.

“New York City is one of the only U.S. cities where you have that comprehensive transit system, where essentially there’s a way to get from anywhere to anywhere,” says Ruth Finkelstein, associate director of the Columbia Aging Center at Columbia University.

Ride-hailing apps, meanwhile, haven’t caught on with older folks, says Ms. Finkelstein. Many seniors dislike automated payments and the lack of regulation.

“There’s a trust issue,” she says.

‘Most accidents happen in the home. We should get out!’

—Vincent Blazewicz

But there does seem to be an exception. Via, a shared-ride service currently limited to weekdays in Manhattan, says it serves a disproportionately large senior clientele. Spokeswoman Gabby McCaig attributes this, in part, to the service’s simplicity.

David Salz, a retired business owner who uses Via several times a day to meet friends and fetch his grandkids from school, says he also likes the low fares. A recent ride from Park Avenue and 89th Street to the West Village cost $5.44.

“Most have nice classical music playing,” adds his wife, Barbara Salz.

But that bargain pales in comparison to the 24/7, door-to-door service provided by Access-A-Ride. While the Metropolitan Transportation Authority says its program costs $72.75 a ride to operate, customers, who must pass a disability screening, pay just $2.75 to travel anywhere in the city.
This week I boarded an Access-A-Ride van with Mr. Blazewicz from his Marine Park home to Brooklyn College. He scheduled the ride a half-hour before he needed it, as he said he finds it runs behind schedule. It arrived 15 minutes early.

A retired insurance investigator who sings in three choirs and attends classes at two colleges, Mr. Blazewicz takes full advantage of the service, journeying several times a week.

He also has a lot of fun. After handing his walker to the friendly attendant and clambering up the ramp, he turned to a fellow passenger.

“You the lady who slipped on a banana peel?” he said. “I’m 88 years old. I’m widowed! I’m looking for a nice girl who can cook!”

She gave him a look.

“Where you from, the islands?” he persisted. “Haiti! Those are my best people.”

She agreed to a quick game of hangman before getting dropped at her doctor’s on Avenue P.

We continued the journey. The van was sleek, spacious and clean, with cup holders and handle grips galore. Not bad!

Mr. Blazewicz turned to the driver. “Where you from? Jamaica? Bob Marley! I love his music!”

We got to Brooklyn College on time. But Mr.
Blazeveczka says he uses the service only for one-way trips departing from home—he finds it too unreliable for return trips.

The problem is outdated technology, says Rachel Pardo, a program officer at the New York Community Trust, a community foundation. Access-A-ride is far behind the likes of Uber when it comes to scheduling and routing efficiencies, she says.

The Trust is funding a New York University study to gather data on Access-A-ride use and future demand. “It is a very costly program, and there’s very little data available on the customer experience,” says Ms. Pardo.

MTA spokesman Kevin Ortiz says the rides are efficiently planned considering the demands of routing shared rides for 22,000 daily trips by more than 2,400 drivers. Recent improvements, he says, include better real-time control using GPS and mobile data terminals providing route maps for drivers.

The system is expensive compared with a car service, thanks to the cost of driver benefits, strict vehicle maintenance and the city’s “zero-negotiation policy for all trip requests,” says Mr. Ortiz.

Still, for $72.75 a ride, couldn’t we just hire everyone a private driver?

I contacted Midtown’s Household Staffing International to check rates. A full-time chauffeur, it turns out, starts at $65,000 a year, car not included.

Alas, says Director George Handin, there’s no public subsidy for seniors requesting a chauffeured limousine. “Maybe,” he says, “it’s an idea whose time has come.”

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