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Jon Shapley photos / Houston Chronicle

A group of friends, including Wara Bocangel, front, and Aude Pertoudi, in white, dances on the Wave bus.





Riders climb aboard the Wave, which takes both call-ahead customers and street pickups.

Lauren Johnston, left, and Lauren Summers ride around downtown as part of a small bachelorette party.

RIDING THE WAVE

For revelers planning multiple downtown/Midtown stops, jitney service is way to go

By Maggie Gordon

Sam Gutierrez spends large chunks of his Saturday nights staring at red lights from the driver's seat of an orange bus, as a chopped-and-screwed soundtrack bumps the bass. Early in the evening, he is often by himself, running a route through the city's inner core to offer \$8 one-way rides and \$15 all-night passes to bar hoppers in need of transportation. But when groups climb aboard, the Wave bus shifts into party mode.

Gutierrez' music switches

out for a passenger's Spotify account, and fists pump as revelers serenade each other to the tune of Taio Cruz's "Dynamite." The bus shakes with killer dance moves as it crawls from downtown's Little Dipper to the next stop at Glitter Karaoke, a Midtown bar.

The environment feels like a shuttle bus back from a college fraternity formal, but the 13 men and women who hop on board at 12:30 a.m. are mostly in their 30s.

"We do this once every couple months," says Andy

Law, 32, a software consultant who helped organize the outing with his friends, most of whom live in Midtown. "Any time we try to do a bar crawl, the Wave is, like, the first thing we think of."



The group had kicked off its bar crawl at about 6:30 p.m. in Midtown before plotting a scattered course across the city. They plan to keep going until closing time at 2 a.m., placing calls to the Wave's dispatch center about 20 minutes before they leave one bar for the next.

"Honestly, the value of (the

The Wave

When: Regular jitney hours run 6 p.m.-midnight Thursdays, 6 p.m.-3 a.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 5 p.m.-midnight Sundays.

Details: 713-863-9283; thehoustanwave.com

Cost: All-night passes \$15; one-way transportation, \$8; monthly pass, \$60

Wave) is if you know that you want to go to multiple different bars, which I think actually is the best way to do Houston," says Dan Frigo, 39. "If you're

Wave continues on E2

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ART NOTES

Wave provides safe transportation home for riders in service area

Wave from page E1

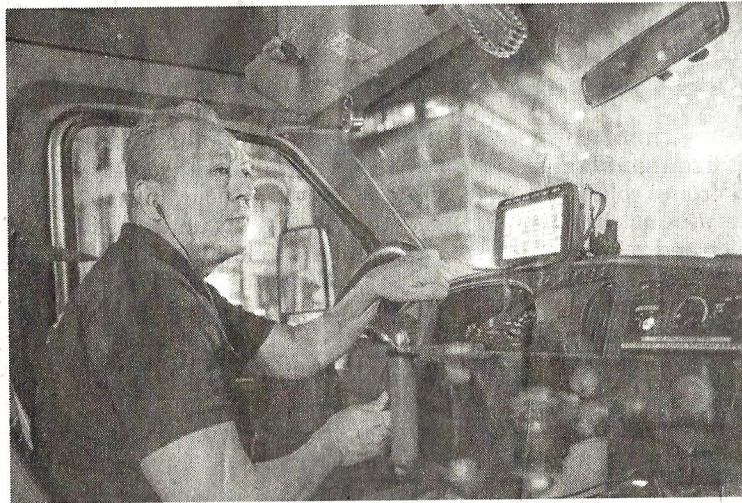
only going to go to one or two places a night, it's not worth it."

More concise itineraries or outings with fewer people lend themselves more naturally to services such as Uber or traditional cabs.

"If you have two couples going out for dinner, then it makes sense to use Uber. But anything more than five or six people, it's best to use something like this," Law says. "Especially the fact that \$15 gets you from A to B to C to D for the whole night, you know? With Uber, you pay for every journey."

A bachelorette party of four from Cypress has similar thoughts when they board the bus to head back to Hotel ZaZa after dinner at Guadalajara Hacienda. Bride-to-be Corie Villarreal needs a more comfortable pair of shoes before they head off to the Dogwood in Midtown.

"With an Uber, if it's busy, they're going to charge more. Whereas with this, it's a flat fee," says Lauren Johnston, 31, of Cypress.



Jon Shapley / Houston Chronicle

Driver Sam Gutierrez circles a Wave route around downtown, Midtown and the Washington corridor.

That said, Gutierrez says Uber has cut into the Wave's user base as the smartphone-based cab company increases in popularity.

Groups like Law's friends and the bachelorette party are a big part of a typical Saturday-night route for Gutierrez, but they're not the whole of his evening. During the quieter

pockets, when the blue LED lights in the passenger portion of the bus illuminate empty seats, Gutierrez loops methodically around the Wave's service area, which stretches from the Heights on the north to Rice Village on the south, and east to west from EaDo to Sage.

"The jitney route that we do, we're licensed by the city, so we

have to pretty much stick to our city route and service area. And we do that route for most of the night, unless we get called with a job," he says, circling near Minute Maid Park, stopping three times in one block to open the door and ask pedestrians if they need a ride. The seven buses meandering through the city on the weekends don't cling to a schedule the way city buses do, and there's no telling what time they'll pop up at a given bar or intersection, thanks to the balancing act between call-ahead customers and street pickups.

Saturdays are the Wave's busiest night, and though many riders board with friends of their own, the shuttle becomes a social melting pot of young Houstonians come closing time.

"It's turned into its own social scene," says Lauren Barrash, president and CEO, who launched the jitney service in 2009 with one bus. "We actually now have a couple that is engaged after meeting on the bus."

The Wave is the only service of its kind in Houston, and it

helps provide safe transportation home for riders in its service area — a move that keeps drunken drivers off the road in a city that reported 1,663 drunken driving car accidents in Houston last year, resulting in 85 deaths, according to the Texas Department of Transportation.

Blink and you'll miss it. Barrash says demand along the party corridor is so high at the end of the night that the buses fill up quickly, shuttling home as many people as possible, rather than methodically cruising the streets. Calling ahead for a pickup is the best way to ensure a spot on board.

Though the jitney is a nighttime staple in Houston's bar culture, the Wave also runs when the sun is out, with routes beginning as early as 5 p.m. on Sundays and special events such as chef-led culinary tours and brewery tours.

"We're public transit for cool people," Barrash says.

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Ann videos demonstrate survival techniques for various scenarios