

H_Championship Assignment

Hed: The Commuter Convoy

Deck: San Francisco Ferries once dominated Bay Area travel, can they return to past greatness?

Word count: 999

Matt Ryan raced for the first ferry headed to Alameda on Monday morning. It wasn't to secure a seat — fewer than 10 people entered the 400-person boat — his bike tire popped on his way to the docks, so he ran to make up for lost time.

He uses the desolate transport each morning for his job as a test engineer at Astra, an American rocket building company, as do most of his coworkers. He could drive, but Ryan likes to calm his mind before his busy day of launching spaceships.

"Plus, you can see 'the good view,'" Ryan said as he gazed across the hazy San Francisco skyline.

Ferry ridership in the Bay Area set course for continued expansion in the past decade, with 3.2 million people using the boats in 2019. But the COVID-19 pandemic sunk ridership by 92% overnight.

While recreation users have climbed back to normal numbers, boat commuters have stayed home, and ferry administrators have tried everything they can to get riders to return.

Just 60% of commuters have returned since prepandemic levels, according to Thomas Hall, spokesperson for the Water Emergency Transit Authority — the bay's ferry regulation agency.

The agency slashed ticket prices and opened new routes in 2021 as an attempt to kickstart the service. Hall said the number of unique riders returned to 2019 levels, but those people simply use it less frequently.

"Last year, we found that the average rides per week for commuters went from just about four to below three," Hall said. "It's just a huge shift."

Heather Booms moved from downtown San Francisco to Alameda during the onset of the pandemic. Although her job at a private equity firm returned to in-person work, she only needs to come in two days a week. When she does, she rides the early morning ferry.

"I sometimes take BART, but this is more pleasant. It's quieter," Booms said. Even though Booms has started to commute to work again, her job will move back to remote-only from July through August. She plans to travel over the warm months.

Recreation boats, which run to tourist attractions, returned to 100% from 2019, according to Hall. Tina Goan experienced that when she walked onto her first ferry to Angel Island on Sunday, despite living in San Francisco for 20 years.

“I know it’s kinda crazy, but there’s a first time for everything,” Goan said as she adjusted her large blue backpacking bag. She and her friends Julia and Jun peered over a map of the island, eager to find their other friends already setting up camp in the timber-covered hillsides.

Just a row ahead on the packed vessel, Hakan Yorukoglu stared off toward the Golden Gate Bridge. He takes the ferry every couple of weeks to relax. He usually goes hiking at Angel island, and he sometimes takes a ship to Sausalito to avoid traffic.

“It’s the cheap way to enjoy the sea,” Yorukoglu said. An environmental architect by trade, he said that the ferries will always serve as an important tool to limit emissions from cars. The boats currently run on diesel engines, which produce greenhouse gas emissions.

Ferry administrators hope to run half of the fleet emission free by 2035, but it didn’t make much of a difference to Yorukoglu. He explained the boat’s shared use lowers people’s carbon footprint anyway, and the electric option still consumes energy.

“Too many people are focused on the source of energy, rather than the conceptional use of energy,” Yorukoglu said, adding, “We can’t just swim across the bay.”

Before the construction of the Golden Gate and Bay bridges, people used ferries as the main source of transportation.

A ferry connected Oakland to San Francisco as early as 1850. Boat companies swelled to transport roughly 60 million people annually in the 1930s, according to the Bay Crossing company in 2001.

Ferries have been marooned in much worse situations. In 1958, no water transit companies operated in the bay, as the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge and the Bay Bridge stifled ridership.

Hall said the ferries reemerged as traffic lengthened commutes and natural disasters sometimes made water the best way to travel. The 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake stranded thousands of people in San Francisco after the Bay Bridge collapsed.

“The night of the earthquake, there was no east bay ferry service to speak of. There were a lot of private operators that still existed ... they heard the emergency response on the radios, heard that there were thousands of people at the Ferry Building stranded,” Hall said. “All night they just carried people back and forth, just to get people where they needed to go. And that really sparked a renewed interest in east bay ferry service.”

Hall said the ferries hope to reach normal service levels by next year, but administrators cannot do much to get people back into the office.

Ryan, the rocket scientist, uses the east bay service, but he's new to San Francisco — only using the boat for the past three weeks. He admitted that his boat rides to work almost always sit empty, but he argued there isn't a more viable option to completely replace the boats.

"No matter how much of a Sh*thole San Francisco becomes, people will still come and take it," Ryan said. "Maybe with less demand there will be fewer lines, but people still use it. I will still use it."

Across the bay on Angel Island, Goan climbed the old perimeter road up the steep hills of the once immigration station and military base. With each step, more sailboats, cargo ships and even the occasional ferry dotted the horizon.

Despite never stepping foot on the island before, Goan defended the future of the ferries. As long as there is a bay, Goan said there should be a ferry system, and it must be accessible.

"It's for the people," Goan said. "It connects us with the city and nature alike. There's not much else like it."