

“Reading Underground”

By ALEXIS MAINLAND

Reading on the subway is a New York ritual, for the masters of the intricately folded newspaper, as well as for teenage girls thumbing through magazines, aspiring actors memorizing lines, office workers devouring self-help inspiration, immigrants taking comfort in paragraphs in a familiar tongue. Since most trains are still devoid of Internet access and cellphone reception, the subway ride remains a rare low-tech interlude in a city of multitasking workaholics. And so, we read.

Even without a seat, even while pressed with strangers into a human panini, even as someone plays a keyboard harmonica and rattles a cup of change, even when stumbling home after a party - we read.

Deborah Hairston, who works in a cancer unit was using her commute to peruse the catalogs that stuff her mailbox each week. “I don’t want to read the news or get involved with anything too heavy. I have enough of that in my life.”

Donalay Thomas is the kind of reader who creates a private space for herself with her iPod earbuds firmly in place. “I always listen to music while I read on the train because it sets the mood for me to get lost in the author’s plots.” “I can become one of the characters that I’m reading about.”

Ms. Vallas, 21 and a student, said she typically used her train time to read or write. “It’s the one the time of day that you have completely to yourself with no sort of immediate obligations, unplugged,” she said. “Although you’re surrounded by people, the anonymity is really forgiving.”

Jesus Figueroa, a Tremont counselor for six summers, readied the campers to board: “Get your books ready.” An explosion of titles were pulled from backpacks. According to a church rule, Tremont campers must read whenever they win a seat on the subway. Each day, campers select a book from the church library or bring one from home. They practice reading in short increments — 20 minutes here and there — and keep reading journals to document their progress. “The books keep them occupied while they ride and help them stay on point with their reading skills,”

Ms. Ma, 68, a native of Korea who came to New York in 1981 via Thailand, speaks in heavily accented English. Her reading goal is simple: “I am learning through these books to become a better human being and get better at English.” “I try to improve myself every day.”