

CONDÉNET

THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

IN THE
MAGAZINEGOINGS ON
ABOUT TOWNTHE TALK
OF THE TOWN

THE CRITICS

SHOUTS &
MURMURS

FACT

FICTION

CARTOONS

ONLINE ONLY

FROM THE
ARCHIVE

November 23, 2004 | home

DEPT. OF CALCULATION

TWO BUCKS

Issue of 2003-05-19

Posted 2003-05-12

Two dollars doesn't buy much—half a hot dog at Yankee Stadium, one shined shoe outside Grand Central—but it is twice as much as one, and everybody, unfortunately, is acquainted with the value of a dollar. Two dollars will get you a roll of hockey tape, or a Budweiser tall boy, or a few .9-millimetre rounds, or a bet at OTB. At the Brighton Clean laundromat, on West Fifteenth Street, it buys an hour and twenty minutes of dryer time; at Show World, the peepshow palace on Eighth Avenue, it's good for six minutes of "Barefoot & Pregnant" or "Dawn of the Debutantes" in booth No. 16. Two dollars also happens to be the amount, according to the World Bank, that a person must earn every day in order to stay above the poverty line. This standard applies to the underdeveloped world and not to an overdeveloped town like New York, where, last week, the price of a subway or bus ride finally rose from a dollar-fifty to two bucks, after a judge ruled that allegations of financial shenanigans at the Metropolitan Transportation Authority did not preclude a fare hike. You don't have to be starving to feel that two dollars is a lot to pay for a token, especially now that you don't actually get the token (tokens were eliminated last week, too). MetroCards will henceforth be depleted in giant steps. Two trips a day, five days a week, fifty weeks a year: that comes to an extra two hundred and fifty dollars annually, the equivalent of seven whole dryer days at Brighton Clean. In the middle of all this, the Federal Reserve muttered some things last Tuesday about deflation, though almost everything in these parts seems to be going up: taxes, taxis, tolls, gas, rent, yogurt.

One good thing the fare hike did was to reinstate the pizza principle, an economic axiom advanced twenty-three years ago, in the *Times'* Metropolitan Diary, by Eric M. Bram, a patent attorney in Tarrytown. Bram observed that in New York the subway fare almost always mirrors the cost of a slice. In 1964, when he first noticed this phenomenon (on a trip out to the World's Fair, in

e-mail
this page
to a friendprinter-
friendly
page

this week's talk

[COMMENT](#)[DEPT. OF
CALCULATION](#)[AT TEA](#)[HERE IN THE
HOMELAND](#)[SALES DEPT.](#)FREE 2005
CARTOON
CALENDAR!THE
NEW YORKERGIVE A GIFT
GET A GIFTSHOP EARLY > ORDER NOW
< CLICK HERE >

Subscription Services

THE
NEW YORKER
COLLEGE
TOUR

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
ANN ARBORUNIVERSITY OF TEXAS
AUSTINGEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, D.C.NEWYORKER.COM
cartoon newsletter

it's free!

THE
NEW YORKER
ReaderLink

Flushing Meadows), both were fifteen cents, and they moved more or less in lockstep until recently, when, for whatever reason, the slice inched ahead; most pizzerias now charge a dollar seventy-five or an even two dollars. The discrepancy was troubling, because it forced New Yorkers to wonder if pizza, like coffee and college, had become a ripoff. Now pizza is once again the bargain it was designed to be. “But will this relationship remain now that the subway token itself has been relegated to history?” Bram wondered last week. “And will the quality of our pizza suffer?”

Everyone remembers when something that now costs a lot of money could be had for two dollars—a movie, a lid, a pack of smokes—and there are still many people who can summon up the original “remember when” denomination, the nickel, or even break into song: “Pepsi-Cola hits the spot/Twelve full ounces, that’s a lot/Twice as much for a nickel, too/Pepsi-Cola is the drink for you.” The majority of these people, though, are probably at least seventy years old, and if you are attempting to do effective nostalgia/inflation calculations and you’re using the “senior discount factor” that was recently applied in a pair of Bush Administration clean-air studies, in which the life of each American older than seventy was valued at \$2.3 million and that of each American younger than seventy was valued at \$3.7 million, you’re going to have to start doing some serious math. Here’s one unaudited tabulation: two dollars seems thirty-seven per cent less egregiously expensive to someone younger than seventy. In fact, it feels about like a dollar-fifty.

— Nick Paumgarten

[▲ top](#)

[next ►](#)



[home](#) | [subscribe](#) | [store](#) | [contact us](#) | [forums](#) | [press releases](#)

CONDÉNET

THE NEW YORKER
2005 Desk Diary



Pre-order today, only at
[CARTOONBANK.COM](#)

Copyright © CondéNet 2004. All rights reserved.

Please read our [Privacy Policy](#).

Use of this Site constitutes acceptance of our [User Agreement](#).

This Site looks and works best when viewed using browsers enabled with JavaScript 1.2 and CSS, such as Netscape 7+ and Internet Explorer 6+.