



Tracking their

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Transport reporter

When Tamara Startin began driving trams a year ago, she learnt the art of squeezing people onto a packed tram during the chaos of peak hour.

She'd remind them to take off their backpacks, squish in a bit and she'd gently ring her bell to clear the road, while quietly wondering why people didn't just walk, thinking it would be faster.

Like much of life before coronavirus, that's now a distant memory.

"The really big change happened quickly, straight away when the first lockdown came in," Ms Startin says. "All of a sudden you'd leave a stop

and wouldn't pick up a passenger for five, six, seven stops. The roads became eerily quiet, it's like driving at midnight but it could be 8 or 9am."

Many still boarding trams are health workers. Ms Startin drives along Route 58, passing the Royal Melbourne and Royal Children's hospitals.

She sees plenty of food delivery bikes and scooters and a few elderly people doing grocery shopping.

Many people go about their business in good cheer, she says. "A lot of people say 'thank you, driver', give a hand wave and ask how I'm going, which is nice."

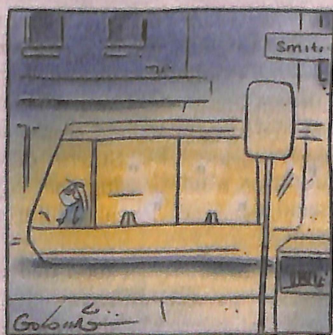
Sometimes, she'll pick up a chatty passenger and wonder if the essential reason they've left home "is to



Train driver May Nicholson (main); Flinders Street Station is virtually abandoned during lockdown (below). Photos: Wayne Taylor



way through a deserted city



have some contact and get out of the house because it's Groundhog Day and they're starved of interaction," she says. "People are really lonely."

The small interactions count. She'll wait at the lights for an extra

cycle to give a hurrying commuter time to hop on. Or she'll search the eyes of cleaners dutifully wiping the train's interior for a smile and say hello. "It does make people happy."

Metro train driver May Nicholson also notices the subtle changes in people's behaviour since the outbreak of COVID-19.

Commuters use their elbows to open train doors. They move about quickly. "People tend to be very hasty, they want to get straight on and off, not touch anything and be very direct," Ms Nicholson says.

Public transport has never run so smoothly, with services breaking punctuality and reliability records.

The challenge these days is to make sure her trains don't run too

early, Ms Nicholson says. "Usually the general flow of people on and off the train maintains the timetable."

Looking around at the empty station platforms, carriages and closed shops, she observes that what used to be a 24-hour city has suddenly gone silent.

"I said it's surreal but it's actually beautiful," Ms Nicholson says. "I know some people find it unnerving because it's not how it's supposed to be but personally, I like it."

Ms Nicholson spotted a lorikeet flying through Federation Square early one morning recently.

"I've never seen those birds in the CBD before," she says. "The wildlife is more prominent. You can hear the noises of the city."