

Call me a Taxi!

Tea Break Travels, No 7

Most trips, whether business or pleasure, involve using some form of taxi. And taxi drivers have somewhat of a reputation wherever they are in the world – sometimes good, sometimes not so. Here are some of my experiences of taxis around the world.

(approx 2400 words)

It is from a series of travel related stories called “Tea Break Travels”. They are designed to be read in a short break from work or whatever, and cost around the same as a biscuit! Some are true, some embellished, and some fictional. Some are from near 20 years of too much business travel, or our holidays, others are relayed from friends and acquaintances, yet others are just plain made up!

Enjoy.

A cab, a taxi, or even a donkey. Most trips include hiring somebody to take you somewhere in their “vehicle”. While most taxi drivers have a story to tell, and do so whether you are interested or not, then occasionally it’s the taxi ride that makes the story. Here are some of mine.

It is spring time and I’m taking a taxi from Dublin Airport down into the city. Well spring time in the British Isles is also the time for the Six Nations, the festival of that great sport, Rugby Union. As the weekend just gone was a match weekend then it seemed only right to cover the rugby in a round of conversation. Unfortunately the Irish had lost that weekend, late in the match to the French. Still never mind, Rugby followers know how to take the rough with the smooth, so I broached the topic in any case. The taxi driver confirmed that to him it was great match, with two excellent teams that played superb rugby, the only problem being that “Ireland was beaten in the third half” What a great way of putting being robbed in the last minute!

We’ve all experienced the apparently suicidal cab driver that veers through city traffic at near the speed of light, just missing total disaster after total disaster, only to get you to your destination safe and sound. It doesn’t always work that way however. I had flown into Brussels Airport from Nice one morning and after queuing for 10 minutes or so finally got into a taxi. Our offices then were very close to the airport, about a 5 minute drive, so most drivers were not well pleased by such a short fare having probably queued longer than me to get a passenger. So we set off at break neck speed out of the airport. Joining the dual carriageway down a ramp we forced a car out of its lane without even a glance to the left. After that the Mercedes was either accelerating hard or breaking even harder as we briefly went onto the Brussels’ ring and then off at the next junction.

I’d explained that when we got to the business park, which straddled both sides of a road, that we needed to turn left at the traffic lights and thought I’d been understood. Coming off the Ring we had several close encounters and at the ‘Give way’ onto the road that went through the business park, the “give” part turn into “barge”. We were steaming towards the lights and obviously going straight on or right, so I braced myself against the back of the passenger seat and gesticulated “LEFT!”

Without so much as a glimpse in a mirror the wheel was thrown left and the car cut in front of the oncoming traffic, but was now heading directly for one of the largest lamp posts in the world. It was winter time and the windscreen had a sheen from the road salt. Maybe it was that, or blur from the dope and drink that made him not see it. We hit at about 70 kms per hour, square on to the Merc badge – it was like he had used it as a sight!

The airbags deployed, and I piled into the seat back, which I was luckily already leaning against. Those that have had a car crash will know there seems to be little noise, no pain at the time, and you are unaware that your arms, legs and head just flailed around like crazy. And so it was this time with the Merc being arrested to a stop in half the bonnet's length. I did not hear the airbags deploy, just saw them, and the hiss of steam was the next thing I was aware of.

“My foot is trapped!” the driver said in obvious pain. I just didn't react.
“Do you understand me?”

The driver repeated his plight before I really had any idea of what was going on. The only feeling I had was that this *u** had just done his level best to kill me and I was not in the most hospitable frame of mind. I took my carry-on out of the boot and walked off leaving him to work out how to get his foot out of the mess he'd created.

Not something I'm proud of. Not something I'd recommend, but remembering my feelings at the time it was better than hitting him. Our office was just a few minutes walk away and I soon arrived in reception, convinced I was unscathed. Well I could walk, I felt calm, what else was there? The receptionist did not flash her normal smile and “Hello Patrick” but looked aghast as I picked up the pen to sign in. Then the blob of blood fell on the page and the hand I deployed to wipe it away had a finger the size of a sausage. Ah well!

French taxi drivers are up there with the best at all the arts of being a taxi driver, both good and bad. For example:

“Why are we heading North to go to Paris from CdG?”

“Accident, is quicker.”

Or ask for La Defense and all is fine until you get to the subterranean ring road when suddenly they become incapable of finding an exit. I must say it is confusing, but they live there. Before I became tired of the ten laps of La Defense and learned to ask for the Metro station instead of the hotel (it was simpler to walk from there!), I had one driver that was different. He had set off from CdG with the normal bluster, carved his name with pride around the Peripheric, and then out to La Defense. Once there the certainty left him and we fell into the normal holding pattern. But this one found an exit, only to find it was totally in the wrong place. Undeterred, we ducked back into the underworld and did another lap, emerging in another wrong place. There was much consulting of the Paris A to Z, much grunting, and then another failure. At this point, with the meter now three times the amount clocked from CdG to La Defense, his mannerisms looked every bit as though he was giving up and going to leave me on the road side. But

no, it had become a matter of pride. The meter was cancelled, a bus lay-by taken over as the centre of operations and the map held in every possible direction. He even put on his glasses.

With a loud “Ah!”, the map was thrown to the passenger seat and we were off again. We took the next exit, went up the ramp and straight into the hotel entrance. He was delighted, smiling and waving his arms. He got out, opened my door, and while I stepped out, he retrieved my bag from the boot. I was starting to sort out some money when he stood square in front of me and gestured that the money was not needed, then gave a fully expressed Churchill “Victory V” sign – the correct way round - jumped in his taxi and roared off, waving wildly out of the window.

Free rides in cabs are a rare treat. Another cabbie in the South of France surprised us on trip back from a long and rather good lunch when he refused money and told us he was going that way in any case! But the free ride I remember best was in New York.

It was February and a business trip took me to New York to visit some clients and some of our offices. On the morning I was due to fly back I had a meeting in an office just off Broadway, opposite Woolworths. For the past few days there had been talk of a blizzard but the sky was just grey and featureless, not at all threatening. Around 10 o’ clock the person I was meeting with became agitated at the sight of one or two snow flakes falling on the window sill. After about five minutes he broke off from the meeting saying he was willing to stay a bit longer but he was going out to send the rest of the staff home! Two snow flakes and it is home time, what are these people like?

True to his word he lasted about 30 minutes more then said he also was off, so I left the building to find there was about 1 inch (3 cms) of snow on the pavement. It seemed odd to me that the snow was actually able to stay on the ground in the middle of such a large city. In London, during the day it would be slush and water in no time under the weight of the wheels and feet. A little further along people were having to push cars that were stuck at intersections. All this on just a little snow! A yellow taxi came sliding towards me so I hailed it and was delighted that he stopped. I got in and asked for the hotel.

“That’s on my way home so you get a free ride.” he said peering through the windshield at the snow. I thanked him after all he could easily of had the fare and still gone home.

“No problem.” He replied and drove for a little while.

“You’re a Brit, right?”

“You’re right, I am.”

“I can always tell. It’s the way you walk!” he dissolved into laughter, but it sounded good natured so I joined him.

“Now tell me,” he continued, “You have the day after Christmas Day off, don’t you?”

“Yea we do.”

“You call it Boxing Day, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Why?”

I am stumped. I have no idea at all. And about my own country!

“Is it the day you have the big fight?”

“No,” quietly spoken.

“Is it when you trash all the present boxes?”

“No,” even quieter. “I’m going to have to say I don’t know.”

He threw up his hands and then grabbed the steering wheel to regain control on the snow.

“Just goes to show,” he said, then pulled into the kerb, or should I say sidewalk.

“There you are, enjoy the blizzard!”

I thanked him again. Despite the banter he was probably the last “yellow” left down town and had taken pity on a Brit. I now know why we call it Boxing Day, and better than that, I’ve a question to ask the next NY Cabbie. “Why do they call this place the Big Apple?” Google it! The hoax version is saucier than the horse racing version.

And just to round off, a little story of Greek taxis. We went to Santorini many, many years ago. It was before the cable car that takes you from the ferry port up the cliff side to Thira. So after a day and half of flights and ferries we arrived at sunset. (A little aside, everything you may have heard about the sunset in Santorini is true, it is fantastic. If you are down in the bay the limestone cliffs just put on colour show the likes of which I’ve never seen approached, let alone bettered. Still I digress ..) We got off the ferry and are faced with a hairpin stair case disappearing up the cliff or the choice of a ride on a donkey. “Donkey please,” said our tired bodies.

So we asked the price, did a deal and got on a donkey each. Then came the question,

“you are leaving luggage here?”

“No we need it with us.”

“Extra.”

So another deal was done to transport the luggage, only to find that when he had pocketed the cash he just lifted one case and gave it to my wife, gave other to me and set the donkey train off at a fast walk. Now I’m sure these donkeys were not thick (in donkey terms of course) or blind, but their technique for working out when to take the hair pin bends was basically to walk into the wall around the outside of the hairpin bends. Now that’s fine for the donkey, because your legs are between it and wall. It was unpleasant but bearable. Further up the staircase the wall gets higher and that does become a problem, because the only way you can keep your cases with you is to hold the sides, and now your knuckles get a skin deep scrap at every other turn! By the time they stop the back of your hand is mush. And then you find you have another 60 steps to go to get to the main square. Welcome to Santorini!!

But our taxi experience on that trip did not stop there. Our package holiday instructions said catch the bus to Kamari beach. We not only found the place the bus left from but, low and behold, the bus was there. Locked. The driver was in the local bar we were told, and it would go sometime later. Around an hour later the driver did appear, but only to wipe the bus schedule blackboard clean – meaning there was no more buses that night – and return to the bar. We were well over our sell by date by then, but were surprised to find the agents for our tour operator were still open. They looked very sympathetic and then suddenly sprang into action. A taxi was flagged down and at last we were covering

the final leg of a 36 plus hour journey. We were so grateful when we finally arrived at the small hotel I added a few Drachmas to the very small fare. The mood change was instant. Our non English speaking but smiling cabbie turned into a shouting angry man. “Ops! Too small a tip,” I thought. The extra coins were hurled across the roof of taxi at us. He then slammed his door shut, reversed at speed and drove into the night, still shouting. We were puzzled, but too tired to do much else than fall into our room and go to sleep. In the morning we found one of the owner’s sons spoke some English, mostly learned it seemed from watching his favourite football team – Epsswitch. We told him of our experience and that we really wanted to understand the problem. He shrugged as much as to say we got what we deserved, but then explained. “If you give a tip you are saying I’m richer than you, you look like you need my help. If he needed more money he would have charged you more.”

Thinking back I wonder how long that concept lasted as Santorini became a more and more popular holiday resort. We must go back and see. And talking of travelling, I must go, my taxi is waiting