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The Singapore Taxi

By Ieuan Dolby

The Singapore Taxi

by: **Ieuan Dolby**

Fast, easy and efficient could describe life in Singapore. You don't stroll along the streets in a world of your own with time to spare and you definitely do not walk when a taxi is waiting nearby. Life in Singapore is geared towards the making of money and any spare moment given is put to that task. So if one should need to get to work or get to the office, go shopping or attend the cinema (because the children insist on it) then transport is essential.

Private cars are good and super efficient. The MRT or underground system is also a perfect feat of Engineering: fast, clean and cheap for the average punter, but life also seems to include an inordinate number of taxis. They seem to be required and used whether one owns a car not and even when one is standing right next to the entrance to an MRT station. In an average week one can use a taxi about seven times and that in anybody's books is a lot.

Three companies tend to run the Cab business and all are large and modern, consisting of the latest cars with satellite navigation and instant booking services by a frightening voice box and pushbutton accept system that flashes possible messages at the driver: as if he is not confused enough with the fast flowing and interchanging traffic that is going on around him. Singapore is not a place where once you get into lane you are okay for half an hour so. This is a place where once you have settled into your lane - it is time to change to another, time to enter the tunnel or cross a bridge, go round a roundabout or exit up the ramp. A plate of Spaghetti has nothing on the road system here but it does flow smoothly, it is extremely well designed and it is safe - if drivers do not talk too much and check their flashing job screen every other minute!

To catch a cab one can do a variety of things. The usual one of going outside and flagging one down, another of calling one up on the booking service or joining a long queue at a taxi rank. The first one is the most amazing and also one of the most frustrating methods of trying to catch one: not that there are none available but the drivers have a strange way of picking up punters. There you are outside your apartment and this blue cab with its light on comes floating towards you. Stopping beside the

The Singapore Taxi

pavement the driver will lower his window and ask you where you are going.

And the strangest thing is that if you are not going in his direction or to where he wants to go, then he will not pick you up. Amazing but true! Taxi drivers are very obstinate and although Singaporeans like to make money above all else the taxis do not follow that rule. For them food and sleep is more important and so if they are coming towards the end of their shift or feel like dinner then they will not pick you up unless you want to go where they are going. It is quite possible to stop five or more cabs in a run only for the drivers to shake their heads and zoom off leaving you stranded and confused. A very frustrating time indeed!

The other method of calling a taxi is probably the most efficient and stable one. Simply by calling up the company a taxi can be on its way to you in a matter of minutes and mostly all works well. The third method can also be extremely annoying and frustrating as one usually has to stand for about twenty minutes in a long queue whilst suffering from the heat of the day. But by using a taxi rank you are

assured of being picked up - by law the driver cannot refuse to take you wherever you want to go if the pick-up point is at a taxi rank.

Life though is more interesting than trying to catch a taxi. Life gets more active when one is inside and on the way to their destination. The average driver in Singapore is good. The average taxi driver in Singapore is definitely in need of help. Psychological help in some cases and others just need some basic lessons in driving. The roads in Singapore can be awkward as the forward momentum of the vehicle is constantly disrupted as another stop sign looms up, as another intersection needs to be navigated or another accident causes the whole system to falter. But the taxi drivers even with a smooth road ahead of them constantly apply the break and then the gas causing the passengers heads to hit the seat in front of them and then to be thrown backwards against the rear window.

This action on the part of seventy percent of the drivers may not be totally due to bad driving. An unusually high proportion of drivers suffer from sleep deprivation! They will tell you that this is because of the extra long hours that they have to work (to get a tip from you) but many do certainly nod off whilst you are sitting behind them. In one taxi I was sort of trying to read my newspaper with my head waggling backwards and forwards when all of a sudden I noticed that I could read my newspaper. I mean that all of a sudden I was not being thrown around as the driver applied the gas and break in rapid succession. This was weird and unusual but I accepted it as another quirk of the industry.

It was when we were zooming along at way past the speed limit, that I looked closer at my driver. He was asleep and soundly so and we were heading straight for the oncoming lane. I acted instinctively and jumped across my prospective killer and adjusted the wheel and thus the cars' direction to suit an accident free journey. Whilst doing that I jabbed my elbow into his shoulder (well, it turned out to be his face) to wake him up. A lucky save and if I had not been aware or had fallen asleep pancake time. I never fall asleep in a taxi after that experience.

Signs of the driver falling asleep are quite noticeable should one look for them. The constant opening and shutting of the window and the drivers' constant changing of the air conditioning settings is a good one. Another is the drivers' desperate scramble for the plastic bottles that he has stashed under his

The Singapore Taxi

seat. I would question the manufacturers of these drugs as however many a driver takes they never seem to aid him in keeping awake. Oh and the most important thing to watch out for is when your head no longer jerks back and forth - this means that the driver has fallen asleep and his foot is still.

I normally hate making small talk. I would rather read a newspaper or stare out of the window. But in Singapore Taxis I prefer to keep the driver in conversation as this undoubtedly and without fail will keep him wide-awake. To start off the conversation just say something stupid like, "hot day today" as if Singapore is any different from one day to the next. He will invariably turn the conversation around to asking where you are from and then talking about football and Liverpool or he will turn to the state of the economy. "No profit in taxi driving anymore, no customers and cars cost more to buy than ever before". This should keep him going for a half an hour or so, more than enough for the trip.

I think these drugs may have alternative side effects. I have noticed on some occasions that drivers are a bit high spirited. Now whether this an effect of the drugs that kicks in a couple of hours later or due to something that is completely removed I know not. I am just trying to make a connection as when the drivers take their "keep awake pills" nothing happens. Anyway, I have often climbed into a taxi and been surprised at the activity of my driver. One memorable trip started off okay until he found out that I was from Scotland. I spent the next twenty minutes of the journey listening to bagpipes and a donkey heehawing whilst being thrown violently against the drivers seat and the rear window in turn. No, it was

not music or anything like that but the driver whilst jumping up and down in his seat, imitated the bagpipes and in between breaths became a horse. He used to say "Scotland" at frequent intervals as if to reassure me that he knew where I came from.

Weird! I had another bad occurrence in a taxi when he started to get aggressive against a football team and he spent more time trying to clamber over the rear of his seat, to reinforce his opinion than looking where he was going. I got extremely worried about him and decided that I should leave his taxi as quickly as possible. I jumped out at an intersection and decided that I would not pay for such a ride. I could hear him shouting as I ran away down the hard shoulder - but I don't want to pay to be harassed!

Apart from all of the above the typical taxi journey passes without note. Some of the drivers will seriously annoy you or make you feel sick when they open their door and spit a big gob of mucus onto the road side. But this is the way that they do it. I have asked one driver not to do that again - and he didn't. But generally just try and ignore that. They also tend to get a bit vocal inside of the car if involved in a near miss with another car or have to sit for any length of time due to an accident up ahead. This is due to the fact that if a driver gets out of his car and shouts at another driver then he can quickly and without question be hauled off to jail. The government does not tolerate drivers making a scene in public and so drivers just do not do it, ever. This is all-and-well, unless you happen to be the poor passenger that has to take the brunt of his "road rage" whilst pretending that you are not sitting in the back seat of that particular cab.

Sorry, I seem to be putting them down. The taxi system and the drivers are quite excellent and safe in Singapore and no less than any other town or city the world over. When hiring a taxi in Singapore you are ensured of a rapid and free journey to your destination and the cost is not prohibitive, you are safe

The Singapore Taxi

and looked after at all times. One thing does puzzle me though, that of why the drivers constantly ask the passengers which way they would like to go. Having just arrived in Singapore I pick up a taxi at the rank just outside the airport. I give him the name of the hotel and off he sets. After five–minutes this driver will invariably turn around and ask me whether I would like to go by the PIE or by the East Coast Road. Stupid question really as the average person arriving at Singapore Airport and especially one who is going to a hotel would not have a clue about the transport system in Singapore.

I used to think that the drivers were testing their passengers as to their knowledge of Singapore and that if they showed ignorance then they would be carted off on a tour of the city without knowing any difference. But this has not been the case as I have often put it to the test. The driver has asked me and I have given him no inkling as to my knowledge of the city - and he has taken me the quickest route! Such is life!

Listen everybody: the Taxi Drivers in Singapore are of excellent quality and any prospective passenger is assured of an easy, safe and smooth–drive to their destination - don't listen to me.

Just keep your eyes open and the drivers as well if you can!

Ieuan Dolby, from Scotland is an Engineering Officer in the Merchant Navy. He has been travelling the world for 15yrs on an endless tour of cultural diversification. Currently based in Singapore he writes

various articles for magazines and newspapers and is working on a marine glossary.

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Singapore - The Lion City

By Josiah William

Singapore derives its name from the Malay words singa (lion) and pura (city) which is why it is also known as the Lion City. Folklore has it that Malay a prince named Sang Nila Utama saw a lion as the first living creature on the island and decided to name it Singapura as a result.

The Lion City was originally a British trading colony in 1819 and joined the Malaysian Federation in 1963; however, Singapore separated two years later and became independent. It subsequently became one of the world's most prosperous countries with strong international trading links (its port is one of the world's busiest in terms of tonnage handled) and with per capita GDP equal to that of the leading Western European nations.

ENTRY REGULATIONS All who enter Singapore require a passport valid for at least 6 months beyond date of departure. Visa is not required if visitors plan to stay no more than 14 days; most tourists are given a 14–day Social Visit Pass on arrival at Changi International Airport.

CLIMATE Singapore's climate is equatorial, warm and humid all year round with intermittent rains

The Singapore Taxi

throughout the year.

LANGUAGE Several languages are spoken in Singapore but majority speak Mandarin and English including Malay, Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Tamil and other Chinese dialects.

CURRENCY The currency unit is the Singapore dollar (S\$). Approximately S\$1.50 = US\$1

DOMESTIC TRANSPORT Singapore's Metro Rail Transit and the Light Rail Transit services serve domestics travel. Air-conditioned taxis and buses regularly ply the city.

COMMUNICATIONS FACILITIES International Direct Dial Country Code = 65 Fixed Lines = 2,000,000 Mobile Cellular = 4,500,000

Singapore Telecommunications Limited SGX, commonly known as SingTel is Singapore's largest telecommunications company and the largest mobile network operator in Asia Pacific outside of the People's Republic of China. A former government monopoly privatized in 1992, SingTel divested its postal operation SingPost in 2003 and now concentrates on providing internet service provider, mobile phone and fixed line telephony services.

Other cellular service providers in Singapore are MobileOne, SingTel 1800 and Starhub.

Several prepaid calling card and phone card companies are available to call both to and from Singapore.

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