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Jumping into taxi not straight forward like it used to be

Whatever happened to the good old days, when you could climb happily into a taxi-cab and feel almost certain that the experience would not leave you physically or emotionally scarred for life?

Just for starters, there was a perplexing little news story a couple of weeks ago which reported that authorities in Amsterdam are planning to introduce psychological testing for cab drivers.

Naturally, this raised the troubling question: why, exactly, do cab drivers need to be psychologically tested? What have those Amsterdam cabbies been doing to prompt this sort of official concern?

What sort of psychological instabilities are they being tested for? And what sort of questions will be on the test?

"You pick a customer up at the airport, anticipating a hefty fare into downtown. Instead, the customer asks to be taken to an airport hotel three blocks away. In response, do you: a.) nod graciously, and start an innocuous conversation about the weather, b.) mutter dark oaths and scowl at him in the rear-view mirror, or c.) push him under the wheels of the cab and drive over him several times in rapid succession?"

This is the sort of thing that can inspire a bit of paranoia. And no sooner had the paranoia set in than the bombshell dropped — while Amsterdam cabbies are being psychologically tested, cabbies in Paris have been given licence to electrocute their passengers.

It's true. Paris taxis are being equipped with 52,000-volt "hot seats" designed to stun — although not kill — passengers who try to cause trouble.

Now granted, cab drivers need protection against assault. Still, you have to question the wisdom of giving Paris cabbies the power of electrocution.

My own experience with Paris cabbies is that they are not men who see themselves, first and foremost, as their brother's keeper.

Generally speaking, they cherish the mathematical principle that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points, regardless of what may lie in between. As such, they tend to operate on the premise that, if God had not meant pedestrians to leap out of the way, He would not have given them legs.

And the problem of big-city cabbies in general — as you undoubtedly know from personal experience — is that many are terribly sensitive men who are easily upset.

Naming a destination fewer than 12 blocks away will wound them deeply. So will asking: "If the place we're going is 12 blocks south, why have we just gone five miles due north?"

Personally, I have yet to recover from the experience of a 20-minute ride with a terribly sensitive, 250-pound New York

cabbie named Ralphie.

It was 10 years ago. A friend and I were flying into New York from opposite directions, and decided — for heaven knows what reason — to rendezvous at 11 p.m. at the famous Jack Dempsey's Restaurant in Times Square.

Ralphie was on the sidewalk outside the airport, herding passengers into his cab. "Where youse goin'?" he demanded, glowering at me. "Jack Dempsey's Restaurant," I said confidently. "Never hold of it," said Ralphie, and stumped off.

After stuffing three other passengers into the back seat, Ralphie stumped back. "WHERE did youse say youse was going?" Feeling slightly less bold, I said I thought it was somewhere in Times Square.

Ralphie rolled his eyes. "Den why didn't youse say so? Get in the cab."



Weir's
View

By Ian
Weir

I scurried in. We squealed off. Ralphie made some off-hand remark about the Manhattan scenery. We nodded pleasantly, gazing out the windows.

A terrible chill descended. "Did youse hear me?" rumbled Ralphie, in a deeply aggrieved voice. "If youse hold me, den acknowledge me when I speak to youse."

After 15 minutes of frantically acknowledging everything Ralphie said, the other three got out. Big-hearted guy that he was, Ralphie called his dispatcher to find the address of Jack Dempsey's Restaurant.

"Louie," said Ralphie into the transmitter. "Dis is Ralphie. I'm lookin' for Jack Dempsey's Restaurant."

There was a dreadful silence. Ralphie put down the transmitter. He stopped the cab, and turned to me.

"Do you know what Louie just did?" he demanded. "Louie laughed at me. Louie laughed at me because dat restaurant does not no longer exist."

Since you haven't met Ralphie, you cannot know how truly horrifying it is to discover that you have just made Louie laugh at him. Suffice it to say that I apologized wretchedly, offered to get out anywhere Ralphie would like me to, and gratefully handed over the \$25 that he demanded as my quarter-share of the ride.

Ultimately, I made my escape. But I know that, had Ralphie been in possession of a 52,000-volt hot-seat, I would be a waffle today.

It's the sort of thing that makes a guy think. In fact, it's the sort of thing that makes him take the bus.

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