

# Cabbies not taking chances

Some drivers now carry weapons, while others refuse to work nights

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN  
Staff Writer

York Region isn't Toronto — yet, say local cabbies.

Despite a frightening incident last weekend in Markham, when a cab driver was threatened by a 15-year-old girl brandishing a knife, taxi operators here don't believe their lives are at risk.

That's unlike many Toronto cabbies, who are becoming increasingly uneasy in recent days after the brutal murders of two cabbies; one in Etobicoke and one in Brampton. They have begun talking, again, about shields and video cameras in every car.

And while most drivers here still feel safe, they don't take many chances.

"You have to be very careful at night," said Bill Sakorafas, who represents drivers in the informal, loosely-organized Markham Taxi Association. "I know many drivers who have stopped working nights."

He said some drivers carry weapons, such as screwdrivers, just in case. They avoid confrontation and never argue with customers. Off-the-street fares are scrutinized carefully and large groups of people, especially young people, are red flags. Drivers avoid dark alleys and deserted areas. And they stay in close contact with dispatch.

"That's our protection, dispatch," Sakorafas said. "The bottom line is don't try to be a hero. It's tough out there these days. Give them what they want and let them go. Then call police."

"It's not the same as in Metro, but of course we have concerns," said Triple A spokesman Jim Amouri. It was one of his drivers who, after refusing to take the seven-person fare because there weren't enough seatbelts Saturday night, had a knife held to his throat and was ordered to drive the youths to a Markham address.

"Anybody would get a fright," he said. "If you get a knife pulled on you, it's really scary. But things like that don't happen often, maybe two or three times a year."

Screening orders means getting names, proper addresses and phone numbers of the fares and that helps, Amouri said. If people are willing to give the information, odds are they're not a threat.

"Of course, sometimes the customer gets angry we are asking so many questions, but it's for the driver's safety," he explained. "When we pick up a fare off the street, that's when we can't track them down if something goes wrong."

Triple A driver Naz Khan won't work nights. Neither will colleague Rabee Al-Zawahreh.

"It's too scary," Khan said. "Booked trips are fine but off-street pick-ups are just like fishing. But I think Markham is still pretty safe, even Scarborough is peaceful, most of the stories are downtown or up north in more isolated places."

In December, a Toronto cab driver was brutally beaten in the parking lot of the Aurora Shopping Centre about 3 a.m. after four men he picked up in



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Triple A driver Rabee Al-Zawahreh now drives day shifts only.

Toronto not only refused to pay but also robbed him. He recovered, but police are still looking for the suspects.

Dave Tolch, a dispatcher at Today's Taxi in Newmarket, agrees off-the-street fares are the biggest risk for drivers.

"We try to get a destination from them and if it's out of town, we require the money up front. But it's not much protection," he admits. "We have concerns, but it seems a more realistic threat in the southern end of the region."

The northern companies rely more heavily on regular customers and that helps keep them safe, he said. And there are far more incidents of fares ripping off drivers by not paying than any kind of violence, Tolch added.

"We tell our guys not to get into a verbal altercation with a customer over a fare and not to aggravate a situation. It's not worth it. Call the police."

While York Regional Police do not keep statistics singling out cab-related robberies, Sgt. John Sheldon said there hasn't been a significant increase in such occurrences in recent years.

But he warns cabbies to not become victims and offers these tips:

- Maintain a log sheet and keep it current.
- Don't resist.
- Pick up and discharge customers in well-lit, well-travelled areas whenever possible.
- Maintain constant communication with dispatch, updating your location frequently. The fare who is contemplating robbing you may be deterred as he listens.
- Keep money to a minimum.
- Don't let your guard down.

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## The view just got better at Skyloft Ski & Country Club

By Bruce Stapley  
Features Writer

The Uxbridge area ski resort has added a dramatic new 13,000 square-foot post and beam lodge, along with night lighting enabling skiers to extend the ski day.

But while the resort has enhanced its image as the *hidden gem* of the Southern Ontario ski scene, the emphasis is still on tradition and family fun. "It's a family resort," says Skyloft owner and lifetime Markham resident Doug Meharg. "My kids have been coming here since they were three years old and now they have life long friends they met here." Doug says it was that sense of attachment to Skyloft that led him to purchase the club four years ago. "I have a passion for this place. I just like coming up here."



He's not alone. The newly constructed lodge, which features three fireplaces, an open beamed cathedral ceiling and a breathtaking view, has become the Skyloft focal point. "People who haven't been here for a few years just can't believe it," says Doug. "They are in awe of the building." The lodge includes a

large restaurant and special functions *great room*, licenced lounge, televisions, ski rental shop, and a day care facility. It can also be booked for weddings, corporate events and seminars for up to 300 people in the summertime.

Outside, the newly installed lights have served to maximize utilization of the resort's 18 runs. "A big part of our business is in the late afternoons when the kids are out of school so we put the lights in so they could ski into the evening," says Doug. The lights are in keeping with the aggressive approach Meharg has taken since taking over the resort. He added a quad chair three years ago, then expanded the snowmaking equipment to cover 12 runs. A new beginner's hill equipped with handle tow has been set on the site formerly housing the old lodge. Future plans will see a second quad chair and additional snowmaking added.

Doug has also opened up the club to public skiers and boarders on weekdays and evenings. Members and their guests retain sole use of the resort on weekends, but now have the added advantage of being able to ski on weekdays and nights.

Perched 1,455 feet above sea level, Skyloft boasts a vertical elevation of approximately 305 feet. "That's the highest vertical on the Oak Ridges Moraine, about 100 feet more than the other ski resorts in the area," says Doug. He suggests the facility stacks up well against the better publicized ski centres to the north when such factors as convenience and the smaller crowds are factored in.



Doug and his family joined Skyloft in 1969 for the very reason of its closeness and family programs. It is only 25 minutes from Markham. The hill can be seen from just north of 16th Ave. on the Ninth Conc. Looking in a northeasterly direction. On a clear day Skyloft can be seen from the viewing tower in Niagara Falls.

The property includes 10 kilometres of cross-country trails. Snow shoeing and rentals are offered, and there is also a skating rink on site. Hiking trails are available in summer, and tennis courts are also in the works.

A large part of the Skyloft appeal lies in the quality of the resort's instruction and competitive racing programs. Snow School Director Sandy Gardner, a level four ski instructor, is also Professional Development Program Coordinator for the Canadian Ski Instructors Alliance. Race programs include Nancy Green, Mackenzie and Hershey Leagues. There are also race opportunities for adults and seniors. Skyloft junior racing programs are sanctioned by Alpine Ontario South, the body which co-ordinates all alpine racing in Southern Ontario. "Our whole ski school environment is a cut above what other resorts offer," says Sandy, pointing



to such pluses as restricting preschooler classes to two skiers. "It's a great place to come and learn."

The resort offers a special trial plan for potential members. Parents of ski school members are also offered an opportunity to try the resort before purchasing memberships.

Skyloft is located at 722 Chalk Road W., which runs 1km west off Durham 23 (Lakeridge Rd.) and 10km north of Hwy. 7. The phone number is (905) 649-5160. Website: www.skyloft.com.

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**7:00 p.m. Tuesday, January 18, 2000**

**in the Council Chambers,**

**37 Sandiford Drive, Stouffville**

**The Towns Architect, MacLennan**

**Jaunkalns Miller will present the final**

**plans for the new facility.**

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