

Travails of the Night Driving Hack

Posted by

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PEJ News - Ingmar Lee: I've driven hack (taxi) here in Victoria, putting myself through school on the 4pm-4am night-shift since the Blizzard of '96. I've hauled countless thousands of you safely all around our town. I've been a professional driver for more than 25 years, I am an ICBC 'Roadstar,' and have never had an accident or an insurance claim.

Everyone depends on us hacks from time to time and Victorians usually pay and tip for our services. Having met more of you than most, you drink, but you don't drive drunk when you ride with me. Of course, there are those like Gordo who put a big dent in our business, being too cheapo to take a taxi back to their \$350-a-night Condo after getting stinko at the Latrimo home. But there are even greater impacts on the hacksters pay-check than the MADD poster-boys and other maladroits.

I don't know if driving taxi is really a job or not. Our service with a smile barely balances the budget, and goes far beyond simply plying the public along the urban byways. Embedded right into the metropolitan pulse, the cabby knows Victoria's seedy underbelly as thoroughly as its grace and glamour.

Wending and weaving one's way with the sober and the sordid, every shift went somewhere I had never been. Emergency trips by taxi for those who can't afford ambulances are standard fare. Blood, sweat, tears, vomit and other visceral viscids are standard issue. Every night the ecstasy, the ordinary and the agony of our city enters and exits the taxicab.

A fare might sit in stone-faced silence to their destination, another en route might quiver and quake, while the next unburdens the whole seamy sequence of their equivocal existence. Some seem safe confessing their deepest, most intimate secrets in an eleven minute transit with an empathetic stranger. Some desperate lost souls may even invite the hack back to their apartment, looking for love after a lonely night at the lounge. Discretion is given for granted because the cabbie sees all, but we're there to deliver you to your vices, not vice-versa.

Victoria's evening class of clientele clambers all along the cultural cline, bracketed somewhere between the 'Doug' and the 'Snug.' Nothing compares to driving hack for tracking the true truck of the town in all its ghastly night-time glory. Business booms and busts according to the waxing and waning cycles of unwholesome whims. The hack takes all who call.

There's the hiccupping, puking drunk and drug-addled addict who don't know who, why or where they are going. There's the brawling bleeding blaggart who's been bounced out of the bar. There's the sneering and scurrilous Oak Bay teenager partying on parents platinum. There's the hack-and-dash artist running off into the night without paying. There's the US Navy Assault ship personnel, hopping hopefully between Monty's, MacDonald's, Wendy's, the Red Lion and the streetwalker's stroll stoking our economy. There are even those low-lifes who insist on the 'Q' when the big knob is tuned to 'Jimmy Twilight's Lonesome Lounge.' Then there are the holstered highwayman hucksters who are the hacksters worst nightmare.

At 3 am, dozens of Victoria's dens of debauchery debouch thousands of drunks onto the downtown streets. Some 300 taxi's swing into action for the Bar Rush and we hustle, smartly

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shuttling out the seething swarming mass before it riots. As we work through the writhing horde, the sanest and steadiest looking customers get picked off first. As the evening progresses, commensurate with one's creeping exhaustion, the clientele degenerates ~and in the darkest hours of the night after the final raving revelers are retrieved to their residence, that which crawls into the cab is more often than not, the sub-human inebriate, the deranged deviant or perhaps even, the serial slaughterer. When the hack gets hassled, there's no hope in hell for help. The perilous predicament of the attacked taxi-hack is low priority at the doughnut hour. And really, it's the official hoodlum patrolling our hoods who outhoodwinks all of the bottom-feeders preying on the lowly taxi hack, and no 911 call will bring relief.

Victoria's thousand-or-so taxi-hacks pay \$30 a year to the Chief Constable Paul Battershill for the prestigious privilege of plying our trade. The top-cop tops up the cops coffers by singling out taxi drivers from other public servants to pay for an annual criminal record check. But it's the rear-view flasher which signals the most significant tax on taxis. Police diligence and vigilance are clear, and when sirens blare and cruisers blur, we know that yet another jaywalking pedestrian, a helmetless cyclist, or hapless hack is being brought to justice. I was clocked recently by a "ghost car" hidden at the Tim Horton's on Esquimalt Rd at 2:30 am, doing 60 in the 30 zone. No argument there, I did what every cabbie does at Bar Rush, and will do again. While thousands of people seethed and swarmed and rocked the downtown, I was that nights sitting duck, and certainly deserved being served my \$250 punishment. It's no excuse that customers gripe when we gouge them by going the speed limit, especially in the grovelling 2:30 am, 30 zone revenue-producers which everyone always ignores.

While steering that same stretch of street the very next night, another cop in a brand new SUV labelled "Supervisor" pulled up behind me. In mortal terror and outrage, I slowed my cab to exactly the 30 kmh. limit, and crawled along while he tailgated me and the traffic built up behind. Then he flipped on the flash and bashed on my glass with his flashlight when I stopped. After hectoring me about "discretion" regarding the posted speed he terminated my shift when I failed to produce his Chief's Permit on demand.

An anonymous Victoria bus driver subsequently submitted my taxi's license number for my final punishment as a hackster . This penalty, persumably for picking up a flag in a bus zone was \$77. Every cabbie picks up flagging customers in bus zones, and will continue to do so, \$77 fines be damned. I've had it with driving hack now, but what else beckons beneath this bogus bottomed-out bastion of employment? Heck, hackin'-it has been a howl at times, and it was a pleasure to meet most of you, but such persistent persecution cannot be sustained on a cabbies income.