

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KAC-16

Paseo de la Reforma 157-503  
Col. Cuauhtemoc, Mexico D.F.  
C.P. 06500, Mexico

An Unusual Cab Ride

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
Wheelock House  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, New Hampshire

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Dear Peter,

Pedro Heredia's taxi was so large and well-kept that it made me think twice about getting in. Large, sparkling clean cabs in Mexico City tend to charge twice what the smaller, grimy, dented ones do. That is, unless you could convince them to use their meter.

"Excuse me senor, do you have a meter?"

"Yes senorita, I'll turn it on immediately. Please step in."

I got in the front seat with him. Unlike in the United States where custom has passengers sit behind the driver, in Mexico, most people sit up front.

"Senor, I would like to go to Agrarissimo Street, you know, just a block behind the intersection of Avenida Insurgentes and the Viaducto. I want to go to the main offices of Banrural. I can't tell you the address yet, but once I dig it out of my bag--"

"Never fear senorita," he said interrupting with a smile, "I know exactly where the Banrural offices are. Please sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride. May I offer you one of this evening's newspapers?"

I have them all - Ovaciones, Ultima Noticias, Cuestion, or Universal Grafica - which would you prefer?"

"Excuse me senor, but what's your name?"

"Pedro, Pedro Heredia at your service senorita."

Pedro was the first taxi driver that I had ever seen wearing a uniform. It was an evergreen chauffeur's uniform, complete with braided piping and an officer's cap. The cap badge was a large eagle. The left side of his chest was covered with assorted decorations: some were old war medals, but most were souvenir-pins from different tourist resorts. His eyes were dark brown, and his cheeks, like the rest of his body, were slightly overweight, hinting at too many tortillas at mealtimes. A moustache thin as a pencil mark brought a comical touch to his face. Five ashtrays from different hotels were glued to his car's dashboard.

"You know Pedro, yours is a most unusual taxi."

"You are right senorita, and I'm proud of that fact. You see, I'm a man proud of my profession. It is both my duty and desire to serve my customers to the best of my ability. Take, for example, my uniform. I designed it myself, and own several of them. Wearing them

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Kim Conroy is a fellow for the Institute of Current World Affairs. She is a generalist, interested in current political, social, and economic issues in Mexico and Central America.

not only makes me feel better about myself, but also makes my children feel prouder of their father. Also, the policemen and my fellow cab-drivers treat me with greater respect.

"I live to do the best job that I can as a taxi-driver, to serve the people. That's what is important in life. You know, I own another cab. I have outfitted it with a newspaper rack that I keep stocked with the latest editions; a coffee percolator complete with mugs, sugar, and powdered cream; and, on the back of my seat, I've attached a small display cabinet filled with candies, gum, aspirin, and cigarettes. I charge 25 pesos for a pack of cigarettes and matches; you couldn't buy them for less than 29 pesos anywhere else in Mexico. Why do I do it? As a service to my clients."

We crossed a major intersection in Avenida Insurgentes. A policeman was frantically waving on rush hour traffic. Slowing down slightly, Pedro leaned out of his window, tipped his cap, and said, "Good evening officer."

"Service, a sense of caring about others - that's what we need more of in this world," he said as he placed his cap back on his head. "Too many people just care about themselves; they have no sense of responsibility for looking after their fellow man. It's this selfishness that is the sickness of our times. It's this self-centeredness that leads to lack of communication and loneliness."

A large white Chevrolet aggressively swerved in front of us, only to jam on its brakes at the red light fifteen feet ahead. Most cab-drivers would have let fly a long stream of expletives. Pedro said nothing. He appeared totally oblivious to the incident.

"Our main problem today is the arms race. I mean really, it's just insane," he said as he shifted into first gear. "Millions of people die from starvation each year, while more and more weapons are made to do what the superpowers already have the power to do; that is, blow civilization off the face of the earth. I tell you, it's just insane."

We had only ten more blocks to go before we would reach the crossing of Avenida Insurgentes with Viaducto. I sensed a need to keep him talking.

"What do you think of the new president, Miguel de la Madrid?" I asked.

"We have to give him time. He's saying the right things, he sounds honest, but one can only judge by actions. He's only been in office two weeks. We'll have to wait to see if he does what he says he'll do. In general, I agree with his economic policy."

"It must be hard for you as a cab-driver since the new government just doubled gas prices and yet your meter rates remain the same. I assume you hope that they'll be raised soon."

"Many taxi-drivers want them to be, but I don't. Wages should only go up when productivity goes up. Just because gas prices go up doesn't mean that we cab-drivers are providing better services, either in quantity of hours worked, or in the quality of our attentiveness to our passengers. No, the raising of our tariffs will only mean more inflation. That's something we surely don't need more of; you know it's probably going to hit 100% this year."

And what did he think of the out-going president, Mr. Jose Lopez Portillo?

"He also said many of the right things. But he and his men used their power to steal what they wanted. And the money that they stole, they invested abroad. Also, by over-borrowing from international

banks, they have jeopardized the sovereignty of Mexico. Because of their mistakes, for years Mexico will be in hock to the bankers of other countries."

We reached my destination. While I took the money from my wallet to pay him, he came around to open my door.

"Good evening senorita, it's been a pleasure."

Sincerely,

Kim Conway

Received in Hanover 1/24/83