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Getting around Seoul: With Ten Rules of the Road and a Metaphor

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Dear Peter,

One evening last spring, I arrived at the Kwanghwamun bus stop close to midnight and watched my bus, the 135, shudder and spew out black smoke under the weight of a full load, as it hauled off into the distance. After another twenty minutes of waiting, I came to the sorry conclusion that the 135s had gone to rest for the night and I was left to my own devices. I would have to find a cab.

Asia has cities where cabs pull over in search of a fare at the first sign of a Western face. Unfortunately, for me then, Seoul is not one of those places. Cabs are a bargain, and if you try to flag one down during rush hour, or when the buses have stopped running, you are at their mercy.

But, I thought, I was in good luck. (I was still new to the city.) There was a taxi stand just around the corner. I was not up to competing in the contest at the bus stop that was playing in front of me. The bus stop is on a wide road leading up to the capital building, and it is recessed slightly in from the road, with places for four buses, end to end. The buses rarely come close to the curb, and the lead bus does not usually go as far as the head position. If five or six buses arrive together, they string out far behind into the intersection, and you have to decide whether the driver will have the decency to follow the rules and pull into the stop, or, just as likely, open his doors 30 yards away for 15 seconds, and then roar off into the night. You have to prepare yourself for a mad dash in any direction.

That night, 70 or so people were waiting for their bus, or half waiting and half trying to flag down cabs as they zoomed by. The cabs would not pull into the bus stop, so the crowd flowed slowly into the street, which after several attempts, the police had given up trying to fight.

As the cabbies passed by, with one or more passengers in the back seat, they swerved toward the crowd, took their foot off the accelerator for a moment, and cocked their ear, trying to pick out the names of city districts being shouted at them from outside. Then, by reflex, they jammed their foot back on the accelerator. Only after the cab had begun to pick up speed again would

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The Kwanghwamun Intersection

the driver have time to register where the person wanted to go and whether he was driving in that direction. If so, the cab would come to a screeching stop, and the would-be rider would sprint to get in before the driver had a change of heart.

I opted for the taxi stand. Round the corner I went, and I was in luck. No one else was waiting, so I went to the head of the line, filing through the narrow yellow gate. Unfortunately, there were no cabs either. And, even more unfortunately, there was another crowd of people spread out into the street shouting their destinations at passing cabs.

Alas, it was time to shed my foreign ways. I walked out into the road and began shouting "Pyungchang Dong" at the passing cars. After 15 minutes a cabbie had the courtesy even to back up for me, and I settled in for the ride home...but not until the driver had run around the block one more time and picked up three more people going in the same direction. We each paid full fare, and the driver made a nice profit. As I left the car, the driver even apologized to me and cancelled the late night surcharge, showing a Korean talent for the "magnanimous gesture" in victory.

It's been over a year and a half since the city government outlawed the practice of "hapsung," or sharing cab rides. With cabs swerving, braking, and accelerating everywhere, and with people wandering into the street, it created an obvious traffic hazard. It also made cab drivers unwilling to turn off the main roads to deliver a passenger because it would take them off the line to their next destination and make it harder to find other waiting passengers.

But most people were sorry to see the system go. Cabs are all over the roads, but it is excruciatingly hard to find an empty one when you need to. Doubling up on rides among strangers in effect doubled the availability of cabs on the road. Many people were forced to start riding the buses again, which are often jammed to the limits of tolerance for a human rib cage.

Of course outlawing hapsung did not eliminate it. It merely forced everyone to be a bit more circumspect. I haven't figured out when and why the police decide to enforce the law, but apparently it is only the "traffic police," who wear green shirts, who ever get uppity about it. Other varieties of the ubiquitous men in blue don't seem to care.

Anyway, the braking, swerving, and accelerating continues and contributes to a superlative statistic that some people seem half proud of even as they deplore it. (When you are an ambitious small country, anything you are tops at is cause for some public wonderment and pride.) Korean drivers are the world's deadliest. They kill seven times as many people per registered automobile as do American drivers.

The statistic, which came out in the papers recently, only morbidly confirms what most everyone feels when trying to get around the city: the raw, unbridled competition to get ahead, the bare ambition and aggression that often gets people moving very fast, but all too often zooms off into someone else's rear end, or, more tragically, into an unprotected human body. (Most of the fatalities are pedestrians.)

Even riding the buses and leaving the driving to someone else does not provide much insulation from the chaos outside. Passengers can be very nice to each other, which isn't easy in such crowds. But the drivers, reportedly paid by how many runs they complete, are in a big hurry. They hit the accelerator the moment they hear the sound of a buzzer or the slap of an open hand on the sheet metal walls of the bus from a bus girl in the back. Often that sound rings (or thumps) out ominously as you jump up from the street, and you have to reach frantically for the nearest pole or metal bar to avoid tumbling onto the floor. Many people don't make it. There was a grisly item in the papers a few months ago about a woman who fell into the engine housing in the front of the bus after a sudden braking and broke her back.

Despite an hour and a half of screaming and pleading from the woman and angry words from other passengers, the driver would not take her to a hospital until after he had completed his run, even though he passed several hospitals en route.

While outlawing the hapsung system forced some people onto buses, others who could



Fare successfully negotiated



Playing chicken in the snow

afford it, bought their own cars. It used to be here that anyone who could afford to buy a car could also afford to hire a driver, and you can still see many riders snugly settled into the back-seat cushions of a black sedan. But along with the increased affluence here has come the middle-class family car--sub-compacts in a rainbow assortment of colors--that owners drive themselves, complete with "I Love My Car" bumper stickers in English. City planners say they expect the trend to continue, and that even the completion of the subway system will not ease traffic congestion.

Of course, not all road problems result from bad driving. The roads by themselves are nightmarish. Lanes of roads appear and disappear randomly, forcing everyone to scramble unpredictably for good position. Nearly every intersection in the city is built like a parade ground, with huge open spaces where drivers crisscross back and forth looking for a way out on the other side. A generous amber light here lasts for two seconds, during which time it is illegal to enter an intersection. That leads to lots of sudden braking and rear end collisions.

Seoul has relatively little road surface area for the size of the city, and most of that is wide, fast, busy boulevards. They have the feel, and often the speed of a highway in the center lanes, but they have to accommodate local traffic, buses, and pedestrians. When buses stop along the side, most traffic does not stop behind them; it swerves left, forcing everyone else to go left, often over the double yellow line dividing the road, where it forces traffic on the other side to go right to avoid head-on collisions.

To get across the street, the mobs of pedestrians--and there are always mobs--have to play a game of nerves with the drivers. They bunch up at cross walks, and begin to hem in the flow of traffic until they spot a car that has slightly lagged behind and may be able--assuming lightning reaction and good brakes--to stop before reaching the crowd. They then claim the road for themselves and force some fast reaction.

Some people, though, don't bother to play the game. They just declare themselves winners. Often old women, stooped over with a cane in one hand and a bundle of vegetables in the other, choose their own time and place to get to the other side. With apparent rock hard faith in providence, they peer at the pavement and hobble across to the chorus of loud horns and screeching brakes.

Bicycles and push carts piled high with cabbage hide behind buses by the curb, forcing the buses out into the middle of the road unpredictably. Another favorite place for cyclists is between the double lines in the middle of the road, where the waves of traffic magically part for them.

For all the unexpected things that happen, Koreans have lightning reflexes. And if there is an occasional failure of the foot to hit the brake fast enough, who can blame them? Especially when you remember that many of the bus and cab drivers have been at it for twelve or more hours, downing bottle after bottle of energy tonic to keep their blood flowing. Most of the cabs now run on LPG, which is a lot cleaner and cheaper than gasoline. The fuel seems to cause a slight rumbling in the engine, but it is hard to distinguish that rumble from the lugging of the engines in what one friend of mine dubbed "automatic fourth gear." Korean drivers believe that they save fuel (which for another superlative is the most heavily taxed and expensive in the world) when they push into fourth gear as soon as their speedometer comes within spitting range of 40kph (25mph). The tanks of LPG occupy the trunks of the cabs, and I'm told that if you can hit one hard enough from behind the resulting fireworks are quite spectacular.

Despite the hazards, of course, most people do get where they are going without mishap most of the time. This is no small tribute to the skill and daring of Seoul's drivers (and hence a certain pride about the terrible statistics). Obviously there is some way of negotiating the chaos. The following Rules of the Road may help anyone who decides he is up to the challenge:

1. Driving is a battle of noses. Make sure yours is out front. You must establish yourself to gain respect.
2. Don't argue with the big guys; get out of the way. Every bus you see will without fail cut you off or squeeze you in some way that is grossly unfair, dangerous, and illegal. Pay the price cheerfully; you've no choice.
3. When a cab cuts you off, don't fight it. They are more desperate than you.
4. Never assume you have the right to be anywhere you have not already occupied, no matter how fast you are going, no matter how open the road looks, no matter how much traffic law is on your side. No one else will.
5. Nonetheless, always speed. Others will likely get out of your way and if they don't you can harass them by flashing your headlights and blowing your horn. If worst comes to worst, try the brakes.
6. Never allow a space to open in front of you. Someone else will move in and cut you off.

7. Conversely, rush into any spaces that open up, especially if it is in the next lane. It may be your last chance.
8. Don't think that following traffic laws will help you. Others will just take advantage of you. Ignore them...unless you see a man with a green shirt on the corner.
9. Always jump a green light. Otherwise everyone will honk at you and that is embarrassing.
10. Recognize early when you've lost the race. Then it is time for the magnanimous gesture. Wave to the other driver, nod and smile, and make it look as though he is there only by dint of your generosity. Then pat yourself on the back for being a nice guy and a good sport. Relax and make believe you are having fun; it might lead to the real thing.

Happy trails,



Steven B. Butler

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