



TAXI TRIPS
TO REMEMBER
OR FORGET



KENNETH LUNDSTROM

Taxi Trips to Remember or Forget

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to Remember
or Forget*

Kenneth Lundstrom



Strategic Book Group
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Dedication

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preface

Mathematically and often physically the fastest way from one point to another is to follow the straight line, described as “how the crow flies”. Practically, there are often serious restrictions especially in big cities. For years the fastest form of transport has been by private car and in particular in the business world, the taxi has been the obvious choice. However, recent increase in traffic in many areas and the development of fast rail (train and underground) transport means has brought alternatives that even though less convenient in many instances can provide faster services and a better guarantee of arrival on time. The chances of getting stuck in traffic jams are smaller although as we all know if things go wrong it can also happen on the rails.

Taxis still bring the comfort of transportation from the place of origin to the place of destination, which is also important especially for the frequent traveler. The privacy of transport is another issue and generally the advantage in saved time and no need to worry about finding your way are other arguments in favor of taxi rides. As the reader will discover, it is not always the case. However, this book does not focus on complaints about taxi services and I do not want taxi drivers to be presented as a bunch

of crooks or low-lives. How could I ever again sit in a taxi after such an outburst? I believe that there are a lot of excellent drivers out there and many of them are very much dedicated to their job. Many of them have also interesting characters, which I have had the privilege to discover. The stories in this book reflect these aspects and that is why I want to share them with all my readers (both of you!). Additionally, many of the drivers are subjected to undeserved rage even violence and too many drivers have sacrificed their lives in service. It is those men and women that I want to acknowledge for their hard work in this book. My intention has been through some examples to illustrate how different cultures function (?), how things can work in different ways, and what rich adventures one can experience often quite unexpectedly by simply flagging down a taxi in a city or at an airport anywhere in the world.

Although the title indicates the central position of taxis in the stories, I have also included other travel experiences, mostly being behind the wheel myself. As you will see that does not exclude taxi trips! One message, which I hope I can convey to the reader, is the wonderful experience of encountering a variety of characters in different cultures. Last but not least, all the adventures described in this book are indeed true stories!

July 13, 2010
Lutry, Switzerland
Kenneth Lundstrom

1.
Akaba
– *Speed is everything*
(1996)

The explosive Middle East had seen some positive development in the 1990s, which meant that the border crossing between Jordan and Israel had opened for tourist traffic. I had the pleasure to celebrate a good friend's milestone birthday in the southern Israeli holiday resort of Eilat in April 1996. After enjoying sunny beaches, the silent Negev desert and the fascinating underwater world viewed from a submarine, we were ready for new adventures. One thing tourists do in Eilat is to engage in day trips to neighboring Akaba in Jordan. For what reason, you might ask? Let me give you a few typical reasons: First, you want to receive a Jordanian label in your passport to show your friends and neighbors back home. This might lead to some complications in case you want to revisit Israel later on in a similar way as an Israeli label will upset Arabian border guards. Personally, I experienced exactly this problem when visiting Jerusalem for a gene therapy conference a couple of years later. I was questioned why I had crossed the border to Jordan on my previous visit.

It even went so far that I was asked how I had time to go to Akaba and not take any time off for sightseeing in the Jerusalem area. It was difficult to convince the Israeli immigration officers that my Jerusalem trip was strictly business-related and I went to Eilat for pleasure. You do not always mix business with pleasure! Second, you want to get some insight into the Arabic life, stroll along their markets and bazaars and perhaps taste some local coffee. Or as we tried to explain to the Israeli border guards when we returned to Israel that we wanted to see how the Holy Land looked from the other side of the border. This was not so unexpectedly, however, received with little enthusiasm.

My friend had rented a car on the Israeli side, but we were not able to cross the border with the white Mazda and had instead to rely on local Jordanian public or private transport. Crossing the border was in itself an interesting procedure as visas were requested for foreigners entering Jordan unless one had a citizenship of an Arabic country, an Arabic-friendly country or for some peculiar reason Finland. As my friend and I qualified for the last category we declared to the disappointed border guards our right to cross the border without visas, which they unwillingly accepted only after lengthy discussions. This hesitation, I believe, was of purely economical reasons as every visa brought some cash to the Jordanian state and most likely some sort of reward program existed for the border guards to make sure that they issued as many visas as possible. When we had crossed the border, which was not much busier than a solarium in Sahara, we chose the private transport as the public one was unreliable or almost non-existent. We found a bus stop with the timetable posted

for the local bus to Akaba City, but as all information was in Arabic we were unable to figure out the details. While we wondered what to do next an old-version of a stretched dark blue Mercedes appeared out of nowhere. Although the Mercedes was far from new, it was in impeccable condition and the engine sounded healthy. This was not really a major concern as we only planned to travel to Akaba City, which was no more than 10 km from the border. Anyway, better not to have a breakdown in this part of the world. You never know who would be willing to give you the next ride! "Hi, I'm Mahir", said the young and tall man behind the wheel in the Mercedes. Luckily, Mahir means "skilled" in Arabic! He was dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt. Usually it is wise and highly recommendable to negotiate the price at the start of the journey and so we did also this time. "Can you take us to Akaba City?" we asked him. "Yes, and you can pay in dollars. It will be ten US dollars to the center of Akaba", was Mahir's offer, which we found agreeable. In any case, the Mercedes was not equipped with a taximeter, which I guess in this part of the world was more or less considered as extra nonsense.

The diesel engine of the stretched Mercedes had to work hard to accelerate the heavy vehicle to a speed of 80 km/h, which felt comfortable on the narrow but rather empty highway through the desert landscape. However, the acceleration continued and soon the speedometer of the Mercedes pointed at 120 km/h. "I'm glad we can already see the suburbs of Akaba", my friend commented. "Otherwise, we would probably reach the 180 km/h mark if only the Mercedes stays in one piece", he continued. To our surprise the traffic and the appearance of more

populated areas did not slow down Mahir. This was no fun anymore. We missed a truck by a few centimeters and I had to close my eyes because I was sure we would next hit some children playing close to the road. How about the black cat that jumped in front of the car? Did it enter its next life or did Mahir manage to miraculously maneuver past it? At this stage, my friend who had just turned fifty and very much liked to see his fifty-first birthday started the conversation with Mahir. "Mahir", he said, "we are in no hurry! This comment had no effect as the Mercedes continued to race at dangerous speed. "We are really in no hurry!!" my friend repeated with a slightly raised and irritated voice. Still there was no change in velocity. It felt more like we were in a physics class demonstrating the good old laws of physics with g forces and free fall that I have forgotten most details of. Finally, my friend got really upset. "I demand you to slow down NOW", he tried to present with authority. And the Mercedes slowed down! "It seemed to work", I replied and my friend smiled, happy with his achievement. We soon realized, however, that in fact we approached the market square in Akaba and it was not appropriate even according to local standards to enter the bazaars at a speed incompatible to that of camels. We stumbled out of the taxi, ten dollars poorer, but in immediate need of an Arabic coffee to calm us down. It was not difficult to find a place for a coffee on the main street. We enjoyed the thick cardamom-spiced coffee on a terrace and watched the Oriental life so different from our European sterile environment. After a lazy walk through the interesting local market with plenty of handicrafts, souvenirs, spices and delicatessen we felt it was time to return to Israel. And who did we find waiting for us at the

taxi stand? Mahir with his fast Mercedes! And we started all over again with our message of “we are in no hurry.... Dear Mr. Mahir, speed is not everything”, was our message. Either Mahir felt sorry for us or his Mercedes, but this time the pace back to the Israeli border was less frantic, so we returned safely to the Promised Land.

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