

iTaxi!

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Dedicated to my brother Denis, New York City Taxista and Photographer. Born George Washington's Birthday 1944, Died Christmas Day 2011.

I rushed out of the Cuenca airport terminal on an overcast March morning to take a taxi back to my apartment. The first taxi in line belonged to Marco, a well-groomed young man, who drove a clean compact sized yellow cab. I joined him in the front seat, storing my backpack on the floor mat.

"Oh, Lord! Please help me get back in time for our flight!" I silently prayed as we exited to the west into crowded one lane Avenida Espana.

Marco and I introduced ourselves as I explained how to locate the apartment building where my wife and I had naively left our documents. TAME, Ecuador's national airline, requires a passport to check in baggage for its flight to the capital, Quito. We had presented only laminated copies of the national ID, our treasured "cedula," along with travel ticket printouts.

Marco used the taxi's meter which provided me assurance that I would pay the meter amount. I had too much to worry about without having to haggle over the fare with a contrary driver.

The trip back to the apartment measured about three miles, south of El Centro, Cuenca's historic downtown. The Spanish colonial city is in the midst of citywide monorail construction, creating traffic detours in the vicinity of the low profile airport. Perhaps as few as a dozen daily departures occur, with no international flights.

"I am sorry for your inconvenience," sympathized the kind chauffeur when informed of the nature of our roundtrip. I hoped to accomplish it within forty five minutes for the flight was scheduled to depart in an hour.

At the crack of dawn, as light filtered through clouds over mountains to the east, we prepared to meet our original driver at the entrance to the condominium. We greeted German in his yellow taxi at 7:15am. In rush hour traffic, we had made good time, arriving for our 8:40 flight at 7:35.

"It certainly didn't help that we both only had a few hours' sleep last night," I shared with Marco. "We must have travel anxiety. Our Christmas shopping at Otavalo's Mercado Sabado resulted in a pickpocket's theft of my wallet with my original cedula, bank cards, bus pass and \$95 cash. Today will be our first time back."

"Ah! I see. What a shame!" Marco grimaced as he slowly proceeded past construction activity before turning south along Avenida Huayna Capac, named for Cuenca's native born sixteenth century ruler, when the Incan city was called "Tomebamba."

Yellow metal barriers traced the center of the roadway. Marco proceeded cautiously beyond the hazard, and we resumed travel in widened streets about one mile from the airport. Under looming skies we crossed over Rio Tomebamba to new Cuenca.

The goal of making our flight on time inched nearer as we merged with traffic headed in the direction of the city stadium and the north and south artery, Avenida Solano. I felt grateful to the “travel gods” to be traveling roundtrip with Marco. I calmed my nerves to stay alert in this race against time. “You drive well,” I complimented the bespectacled cabbie.

Appearing relaxed as we neared our goal, Marco smiled and told me he had a family. “I have two children. My boy is 14, and my girl, 6.” The proud father smoothly negotiated the stadium circle, and maintained pace with thinned out traffic.

For my part, riding in the front passenger seat accomplished two objectives. First, with limited Spanish, my communication with Marco transpired more readily as we sat across from each other. Also, I wanted to keep us focused on traveling through the city as quickly as traffic permitted, while preserving a friendly banter which Cuencan taxistas appreciate.

Within twenty minutes, we had pulled up to the condo entrance. Our neighbor veterinarian sat in his car parked in the narrow lane, requiring that I acknowledge him in the midst of exiting the taxi. He kindly tucked in his rear view mirror to accommodate the passenger door.

“Buenas dias, Doctor,” I hailed the cooperative man. I reached into my pocket to get the key to the lobby gate. To prevent worry, I took my backpack with me, while Marco waited.

“I think we can make it,” I silently reassured myself. Within a minute, I had arrived at our fifth floor apartment. My wife, Belinda, had given instructions to locate her documents. It felt eerie to return so soon to the light filled room where we had just rushed through our breakfast.

I found her passport and cedula, and quickly grabbed mine. Success!

Rejoining Marco, I called Belinda at 8:07. Our cheap quality cellphones limit conversations to concise messages. “It’s all here, dear! We should return by 8:25.”

“Oh, Jeremiah, that’s great news! Thank you so much for getting them. I will stand in the baggage line till you arrive,” she expressed in a relieved tone of voice.

Marco and I backtracked to the airport in similar volumes of traffic. Children and their parents rushed to school. Commuters crammed blue buses which spewed black exhaust smoke while full throated roars sprang from overworked diesel engines. “We should make it,” I told myself while keeping an eye out for any potential traffic jams.

Our conversation was lighter and more intimate. “Do you and your family go to McDonald’s restaurant?” I inquired as Marco and I passed by the famous golden arches, across from Parque de la Madre.

“No” he laughed. “We go for hamburgers at ‘Mi Burger’ in El Centro. It costs half as much, and it tastes better! McDonald’s is an expensive place to eat. My children want to go inside and play on the equipment.”

“Yeah, while across the street is the running track, playground and the new planetarium!” I commiserated. Traffic flowed smoothly as we re-crossed the bridge over Rio Tomebamba. Our goal of arriving in time had improved considerably with the airport comfortably within reach.

I remarked to Marco how pampered children in the United States want to go to Florida’s Disney World. “Marco, the parents of North American children feel that it is a cultural obligation to bring the family there. It has the significance of fulfilling a religious duty,” I related to the Ecuadorian from family experience.

Avoiding most of the delays created by road construction, we had made good time while taking a detour. At the airport, I exited the taxi with my backpack and the documents. The fifty minute round trip had been accomplished smoothly by the conscientious Cuencano. To show my sincere appreciation, I added \$5 to the \$5 taxi fare.

“Adios!” Marco exclaimed in gratitude.

“Muchas gracias!” I replied as I departed toward the glass doors leading to the baggage counter.

“Thank God! You made it,” my wife cheered as we hugged. “But the flight is delayed. The baggage clerk told me rain storms had prevented the plane from departing to Cuenca from Quito.” Behind us, other late arriving passengers pulled their luggage.

Mother Nature had dashed everyone’s plans. I smiled to myself at this new development. This morning’s mad dash with Marco justified a leisurely savored second cup of coffee.

“Well, my dear,” I heartily concluded, “I guess that Quito will just have to wait.”

THE END