

Two Days Behind The Wheel

Story by Paul Tagliavia

I am a yacht captain from Ft. Lauderdale Florida. My mate Kieth (Cheese) Evans and I arrived in the Dominican Republic at Ocean World Marina around the end of March. After nearly two weeks of detailing the boat getting ready for the boss, we received a phone call saying he would not be able to come down for another week. So, against all advice I rented a car and we took a drive up into the mountains in the Jarabacoa area. I had been told that driving was different in the DR. What I had not realized is there is no rule of law. Stop signs are not obeyed. Traffic lights are a complex relationship between the light color, the size of the vehicle and the courage of the driver. In other words, after a light turns red, cars continue to go through the intersection until the group of cars inching out on the green light can intimidate and dominate the intersection. This of course then continues as the light changes once again, so that traffic flows in any one direction, one half on green and one half on red. The only distortion to this pattern is the presence of some exceptionally brave drivers, or a very large truck whom define the rules in their favor at will. Of course, this is all accomplished with feigns, horn blowing, fist shaking and shouts in Spanish beyond my meager vocabulary.

However, there are rules that the tourist may start to figure out in time. The food chain starts

with and is dominated by the very large trucks, these big rigs, whether tankers or dumpers or 18 wheelers pronounce their dominance with bold action and the lack of mufflers. They seem only to respect one another and are only slightly fazed by children selling cellular phones and battery chargers in bandoleers reminiscent of Che Guavara.

Next down the chain comes the largest and most expensive of the SUV's. Since they are double the price they are in the States a large Lexus SUV is well over 100 thousand US and is undoubtedly driven by someone who can have you imprisoned for life or worse, if you dare scratch their fender. After this comes the vast horde of everyday private cars of all shapes, sizes and vintages. However, in this group there is a sub-set of vehicles which are slightly more dominant. They are the public cars or public transportation. These are ordinary cars that act as freelance busses. These cars can always be recognized by the cardboard boxes they have taped to the drivers side window directing massive airflow onto the driver and their general appearance which is a vehicle that has been in 15 to 20 accidents and has been beaten with baseball bats until no panel or glass has been unaffected. They dominate the right lane and may stop at any time to discharge and pick up passengers regardless of the speed of traffic.

Next are the busses, large and mid-sized which are remarkably dent-free and seem to have some accountability to everyone except the lowest castes which of course, are the motor bikes and the tourist rental vehicle. Motorbike may be divided into two categories, private ad moto-taxi. Since motor bikes make up well over 50% of the traffic, this seething horde fills in all the gaps on the road, between lanes and on both shoulders on the road, if there are any. This can lead to a phenomenal traffic density and a NASCAR-like separation until their maximum speed of 50 miles per hour is exceeded. The courage of this segment of the population can not be underestimated. Very often they are the first to move and set the trend and mood in traffic. Very few of these free spirits wear any protection, helmets are rare, three on a bike is common and can be far exceeded "although the record is still at 8 and held by an extended family in Cozumel, Mexico".

The most fascinating aspect of the moto-bike rider is the vast variety of cargo that is carried. It seems anything is possible. One hundred pound cylinders of compressed propane gas is not a problem for these brave riders. This also seems to get them a small degree of respect from other drivers. You might think a 4x8ft sheet of plywood is beyond an individual on a 50cc moto. Not so, I watched 10 or 12 fifteen yr old boys run a red light right in front of me, each carrying a full sheet. And once you get into the country a fabulous array of livestock can be seen strapped to these versatile vehicles.

By far the bravest and most skilled individuals though are the moto-taxi drivers. These indi-

viduals will go to any length, take any risk to get their patrons to where they want to go. For a mere 20 pesos their complete and selfless loyalty can be purchased with no thought to themselves, they will take incredible risks, no danger too great or odds too high to perform the tasks at hand. These fearless taxi-men will take their slight machines and you into almost impossible situations, achieving feats of driving heroism all in the course of a small everyday fare. This happens innumerable times every hour of every day across this great country.

At the very bottom of this pecking order is the tourist rental vehicle. It is not the vehicle itself but fundamental flaws in the mind of the foreign driver. Because of the high import duties on cars and uncertain confidence in the performance of insurance policies the renter is at an extreme disadvantage. Because in the back of his or her mind lingers the fact that if the rental car is damaged or totaled the bargain vacation could now cost an entire annual income of an average couple after taxes. Also, stacked against them is the probability of a misguided strategy of following traffic rules as they undoubtedly have been trained to do in their home country. This wicked handicap is further exacerbated by a high value associated with human life. This weakness will be spotted by even small children and exploited by all moto-taxi drivers. It all adds up to a crushing disadvantage out on the road.

Upon returning to Ocean World after twice transiting Santiago, I pulled up proudly to the rental return area and watched a drama unfold. A group of tourists, two couples, were carefully inspecting their just rented vehicle with the rental representative. Carefully they noted the smallest scratches and the tiniest door-dings as they repeatedly circled the car. I could not help chuckling to myself, for I had done the same thing just two days before. Now, all that seemed inconsequential, I had safely returned, perhaps like a soldier from the front lines of battle, my priorities had been altered.



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 ● Henry Purcell is a ●
 ● well-known composer ●
 ● few people have ever ●
 ● heard of. ●
