

New York City Taxis and the 'Suicide Surcharge': Cameron on Transportation

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“You know how much money I make driving this cab?” the thickly accented New York cabbie asked me as we careened down Lexington Avenue.

I was just trying to make conversation, as I usually do (often in my Canadian French), and after a trite observation about the weather, I asked him about the new taxi/car service surcharge recently applied to Manhattan rides: \$2.50 for taxis and \$2.75 for Uber and Lyft. He exploded.

It was proposed as a fund-raising effort to fix the subways. But the taxi drivers, call it the “suicide surcharge” — making taxi rides so expensive the industry will collapse.

Or maybe they’re referring to the fact that eight taxi and Uber drivers in New York City have killed

themselves in the past year, no longer able to bear the financial burden of driving.

The surcharge was held up by the courts, but now it's in effect. Step in a New York taxi south of 96th Street in Manhattan and the meter will start at \$5.80. That's the bad news. The good news is, you won't have trouble finding a cab. Savvy New Yorkers are either walking, or taking the bus or subway. Taxis are now expensive. Ubers, too.

So, glancing at the meter, which was quickly ticking off the dollars, I asked my driver if the surcharge was hurting tips. When you see an extra \$2.50 added to your fare, I'd guess many passengers are reluctant to also tip the driver.

"What do you think?" the driver snapped back.

"I drive this cab 12 hours a day, and you know how much I make?" he asked.

I didn't even want to guess.

"I lease this car from the (taxi) medallion owner and I gotta pay for the gas. I even have to pay tax on my tips (when passengers use the credit card instead of paying cash)," he said. "And for all that, I make \$100 a day."

A C-note a day for driving in Manhattan traffic? That's about \$8 an hour. Guys slinging burgers make \$15, the new minimum wage, and have much better working conditions like access to bathrooms and people seldom pulling a gun on them from the back seat. So why does he drive?

My driver said he'd been behind the wheel for 12 years, a veteran for an industry that is often a first job for immigrants. He told me he was ready to retire. Doubtless when he hangs up his keys, someone new will take his place.

Taxis and Ubers are a service. They take you door to door, in your own little steel cocoon, usually heated and cooled appropriately. You can get there fast without the noise and accompaniment of the interesting people who ride the subway. Taxis are usually clean and the drivers competent.

And those drivers are doing this job to make a living, just like a waitress or the guy at Grand Central who shines my shoes. It's less a professional ambition and career track than a way to get by for another week, paying the bills and putting food on the table for the family.

So I don't resent the new surcharge. I'm OK with paying to fix mass transit. But for my taxi driver on this ride, I gave him my empathy and a 25 percent tip. He seemed grateful and I felt less guilty.

See also:

- [How Uber and Lyft Are Disrupting the Taxi Industry in CT and NYC: Cameron on Transportation](#)
(March 28, 2018)
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