

Touring Asia—



Without the Tour Bus!

Story and photo
by Joyce Eisenberg

Photo: Darmo and his becak in Jogjakarta, Indonesia. His passenger is the author.

THE YOUNG MAN LOUNGING outside my hotel introduced himself with his business card. His name and his service were imprinted in gold glitter letters: DARMO—Becak Driver. He and his bicycle rickshaw were for hire at 30 cents an hour. For that fee, I bought not only transportation through the crowded streets of Jogjakarta, but also delightful tales about his childhood on Java, musings on why the Sultan had four wives, and endless patience as he pedalled me from one shop to another in search of the perfect batik tablecloth.

Although he had agreed to meet me the next day, Darmo never appeared; instead he sent his friend Clewan. With the money he had earned the day before, Darmo could afford to take the rest of the week off.

I might have boarded a bus to tour this Indonesian city, but I opted instead for a more intimate form of transportation. Here and throughout Asia, I discovered the charm of travelling like the locals do—by becak, samlor, tuk-tuk or dokar.

If you pass up a tour bus in favor of one of these vehicles—a pedal-powered trishaw, horse-drawn cart, open-air passenger cab attached to a bicycle or motorcycle—you'll be trading in air

conditioning, smoked glass windows, shock absorbers and a driver with a set schedule for adventure. Bouncing along a bustling street, blanketed with the tantalizing smells and sounds of a foreign city, I understood what author Paul Theroux meant when he said: "The journey is the goal."

There are numerous benefits to hiring your own transportation, chief among them the chance to get to know a native of the country. In Sri Lanka, Michael was my driver/guide for a week. He told me how he felt growing up Roman Catholic in a Buddhist country and demystified the ceremonies at the Temple of the Tooth (where I went to see Buddha's canine). He'd gladly stop to pick me the ripest avocado or bargain for buffalo yogurt and treacle for an afternoon snack.

Michael doubled as protector, meeting me at a store entrance with an umbrella when the rains came suddenly, claiming me as his own when overenthusiastic hawkers grabbed for my hand. When I paid one snake charmer to make his cobra dance, he was able to wave away the three other boys who had surrounded me with their snakes.

Whether you are travelling on your own or with a tour group—and want to venture out on your free day—here are some guidelines to help you hire a "car" and driver. (If you are visiting a westernized country like Taiwan or Singapore, you'll find that the rickshaw is more of a tourist novelty than a practical form of transportation. It will be more expensive than a taxi or a tour bus.)

Choosing a driver: If you're hiring a driver for the day, be sure that you can understand one another. Before you even hint that you are looking for transportation, ask the driver for directions or where to sample the local food. If the answer is intelligible, start bargaining. If not, wander along until you find another driver. (If you really need directions, ask a hotel clerk or a police officer. In Asian countries, especially Indonesia and the Philippines, people will often answer your request for directions whether they have the information or not. This is meant as a hospitable gesture, not a deception.)

If the vehicles are pedal-powered, you may want to seek a young, brawny driver. In Agra, India, I hired a wiry, elderly man to steer me through town after dinner for the equivalent of 50 cents. As he pedalled up the small hills, he sputtered and strained; sweat ran off his brow. Guilt-ridden, I offered to walk

up the hill and meet him at the top. He proudly refused.

Ensuring your safe arrival: To avoid confusion, it's smart to have a hotel clerk write your destination in the local language. This I learned from experience. In Jaipur, India, I hailed a bicycle rickshaw to take me to the Rambaugh Palace Hotel for dinner. As darkness fell on the princely city which glowed pink at dusk (it had once been painted pink for a visit by Jacqueline Kennedy), the driver deposited me in the middle of a medieval scene—a street crowded with water buffalo, camels, bicycles, and hordes of Indians. He was tipped and long gone before I realized I was at the now deserted Rambaugh Palace, not the Rambaugh Palace Hotel. I was swarmed by a crowd of people gesturing wildly, pulling my blouse to lead me to their rickshaws. I didn't know if anyone understood where I wanted to go. I selected a young boy with a winning smile and rode off into the sunset with him, not certain if I would ever get home again.

In the future, I was smarter—but not smart enough. I made certain to have my destination scrawled on a scrap of paper. In Taipei, I pulled a piece of paper etched with Chinese characters from my pocket and handed it to the taxi driver. On it were written the name and address of my hotel, I thought. Thirty minutes later, I arrived at the National Palace Museum. Indignantly, I signaled that he had made a costly mistake. But it was me who had made the mistake; my pocket was filled with several scraps of paper; I had handed the driver one with yesterday's destination. Hint No. 2: Translate the destination into English—and carry a small dictionary with you.

The art of negotiation: Free enterprise is alive and well in Asia. You'll find that fares vary according to the distance, the weather (it's higher if it's raining), the time of day (it's more expensive at night) and your bargaining skill. Find out the appropriate fare or the hourly rate from your hotel doorman or a shopkeeper first. When possible, negotiate with a single driver out of earshot of his buddies; he'll be more likely to agree to a normal fare. If you've made what you know is a reasonable offer, start to walk away; in most cases he'll call back. If not, there are hundreds of other drivers anxious to earn some money. Keep your sense of humour and don't get impatient; haggling is part of the game. Most important, make sure you agree on a price before you get in.

Paying for the fare: Keep some

small change—your travelling money—easily accessible in a separate pocket. After you've haggled to pay 200 rupiah per hour instead of 250 (which in Indonesia means that you argued over a nickel), it would be humiliating to pull a wad of money out of your pocket to pay the tab. Pay with the exact amount because often drivers won't give you (and don't really have) change. Refer to your guidebook or ask the hotel clerk about local tipping customs. It's nice to be generous by choice rather than ignorance.

Hiring a real car and driver: If you want some of the luxuries of a tour bus and control over where you're going and when, you can hire a car and driver. This is especially useful if you are travelling from city to city, as opposed to within a city. Your travel agent at home may be able to set this up. Also ask your agent for the names of people who have made a similar trip and call them for firsthand information. When you arrive at your destination, you can call the tourist office for the name of a reputable local travel agent who can make the

arrangements for you. You'll generally pay a rate based on your mileage, as well as a fee for the driver's room and board. (In Sri Lanka, that amounted to \$2.00 a day.)

Airport Survival: If no one is waving a sign printed with your name when you step off the plane, and if your hotel does not have van service, you'll have to arrange your own transportation. Travellers are most vulnerable in an airport—it's hard to disguise yourself when you're dragging suitcases and searching for tourist information. Anxious helpful locals will surround you, offering to carry your luggage and whisk you away to their brother's hotel. They'll undoubtedly promise "a special price for you."

Rule No. 1: Keep away from the Mr. Slicks, the men dressed in suits and sunglasses in a city where everyone else is dressed in native garb. Head in the other direction. I met my Mr. Slick at the airport outside of Columbo, Sri Lanka, my first stop in an undeveloped country. He offered me a ride into town in his mini-bus; I discovered later that I had paid eight times the usual rate. Mr. Slick sat next to me on the bus; as I gazed out the window, transfixed by the native men dressed in not much at all and by water buffalo pulling ploughs through rice paddies, he helped himself to the items in the zippered outer compartment of my valise. When we reached Columbo, I noticed that his once empty briefcase was bulging. I lost nothing much—except my naivete.

Rule No. 2: Make the airport tourist information centre your first stop. Inquire as to the safest, surest means to your hotel. Find out the approximate distance and cost so you can bargain intelligently. Ask what the usual tip would be on that fare. If you need help, approach a disinterested bystander. Chances are, he'll be happy to help, and he won't have something to sell you.

Rule No. 3: Don't hand your luggage over to anyone unless you know that they are an official porter. It's wise to keep your valuables locked inside your suitcase, rather than in a side pocket.

When touring on your own, it helps to be prepared. But when I forgot all of the above advice—as I wandered through an Athens bus station knowing neither a word of Greek nor the worth of a drachma, and not having my destination recorded—I remembered instead the five reassuring words passed on to me by two world travellers I had met: "Somehow, you always get there." ☺

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