BHUVA NARAYAN

My Sydney Cab Chronicles

Taxi drivers, like hairdressers, are the storytellers of our time. Two strangers can share a lot in a short time, even while one person is at work. They share their stories but never ask me to rate them on any app. Every taxi ride for me is like a journey within a journey. In Australia today, over 60 % of the 30,000 taxi drivers are immigrants, and some are refugees and asylum seekers, but they are often the first local that any visitor encounters. Almost all cherish their freedom and talk about taxi driving as a profitable vocation that empowers them with the agency and flexibility that they did not have when they worked at other professions here. Or in their home countries.

Ghulam, Afghanistan

The first person to greet me to Sydney was an Afghan Australian taxi driver. Ghulam told me that his extended family of about 25 escaped from Mazhar-i-Sharif when it was attacked by the Pashtun Taliban in August 1998 where they targeted and killed 8000 minority Hazara civilians. It took them two months on foot across the country and to the Durand Line and through the Khyber Pass to reach Chitral in Pakistan, with donkeys carrying their young. They settled in Peshawar. Although he has two Masters' degrees from Afghanistan (in Literature and in Education), and was a schoolteacher who taught literature and poetry, in Pakistan he ran a shop selling essentials to other Afghan refugees. He and his family lived in Pakistan for six years before moving to New Zealand. He lived in Christchurch for six years, driving a taxi, until he was displaced again by the Canterbury earthquake in 2010, and moved to Australia, and began driving taxis in Sydney: "Taxi driving is the most welcoming job for immigrants. They don't care where you're from so long as you can drive safely." Most of his extended family is still in New Zealand: "I have four children. We made a baby in every country we called home – my first was born in Afghanistan and is now 25 years old and works at a bank in Auckland and has his own young Kiwi family, the second was born in Pakistan, the third in New Zealand, and the fourth, a four-year-old boy, was born in Australia." He said he speaks Persian, Dari, Pashto, Urdu, and now, English: "Doesn't matter, we are all human, whatever country or language. There is a way straight from heart to heart."

Rafiq, Singapore

Rafiq is a 77-year-old man who has been driving a taxi since 1963, a true veteran of Sydney streets. He came to Australia in 1958 from Singapore to study Medicine at the University of Sydney. He is from an Indian-origin Muslim family in Singapore and speaks English, Malay, Chinese, Urdu, Hindi, Gujarati and Tamil. Whilst a student, he fell in love with a white Australian girl and "That was that. My life turned upside down. It was one of those unexplainable attractions

that is still alive, but my parents freaked out and closed the door completely. No more financial support from them for my studies after completing four years of Medicine, and we were going to have a baby, so I began driving a taxi and never ended up finishing my degree. I never saw my parents again. My parents were very rich, and when they died, my siblings pretended I was dead and took all the property. They never informed me. I now have two daughters. They are both well-educated and independent women." He doesn't have any grandchildren, lives on Coogee Beach, drives his own taxi from 9 am – 9 pm, drives home twice in between to have lunch and dinner with his wife, and rents out another taxi he owns. I asked him if he has returned to Singapore for visits, and he said, "Yes, I have, but I am like a stranger there. Nobody wants to acknowledge me. One time, I saw my brother in a shopping mall he owns, and he walked away from me after he spotted me, and I got so angry that I chased him down, grappled with him, and beat him up. I didn't want his money, but how can he pretend that I was dead? I guess that's how families die – over money." Sad story, but a man still ready to stand by his one true love!

Rostam, Iran

Rostam has a PhD in Linguistics and worked as a casual academic at a university in Sydney for several years before he gave up and began to work for a marketing company. He still loves the joys of academic life. After two decades in marketing, he took an early redundancy, retired, and started his own business tutoring online in interpretive linguistics. He drives a taxi when he needs some extra money. He left Iran in the early 70s much before the revolution and lived in South America for five years – "the only place I could get a visa to go to." Then, when the Iranian revolution happened in 1979, he emigrated to Australia rather than go back to Iran. He has a wife and two kids here. Because of his name, I told him about how I loved the story of Sohrab and Rostam from the *Shahnameh* when I was young, and he in turn quoted from Matthew Arnold's Sohrab and Rustum "Together as two eagles on one prey / Come rushing down together from the clouds / one from the East and one from West…" I was impressed with his memory, but then who wouldn't memorise a poem written for one's own namesake?

Adnan, Iraq

Adnan is a handsome Iraqi Australian taxi driver who looks like a young Omar Sharif. He says it's his private black cab and that he drives it every other day – a day on, a day off, while his cousin drives it on off days. He has been in Sydney since 1996 but has his whole family back in Iraq still, except for his wife and his young children who were born here. "We were born into war and woke up to war every day and nobody can understand how we got used to it, but we did. And we didn't. The children of my sisters are still in Iraq, like millions of other Iraqi children today, who go to a school which can only be open for four hours a day due to lack of staff and where 60–70 students are crammed into every classroom for the four hours. The desks seat only half that number of students, so the students take turns at the desks for half an hour at a time, while the others sit on the floor. And they are all bright students that are eager to learn. And pass. And ace their exams." I asked about his own education, and he said he was a mathematician but could not get into the field here in Australia, but is thankful to be able to make a living driving a taxi.

Kwabena, Ghana

Kwabena is a Ghanaian Australian man who has lived in Sydney for 30 years: “The best city in Australia.” He left Ghana in 1974 and lived in London for 10 years where he met and married a British woman who was born and raised in Australia. His wife wanted to move to Brisbane so she could be closer to her family. He arrived in Brisbane in 1984 and lived in The Gap. He decided he wanted to party on a Saturday night and took a bus to the city centre in Brisbane. When the bus arrived at its final stop, he asked where the city centre was. They said, “This is it.” He said “What? So empty? Nothing here? If I shot an arrow there would be nothing to hit and you would never find it again! Or me. I’m getting out of here!” His wife refused to move to Sydney although he had moved to Australia for her. The marriage didn’t last too much longer after that although they had two girls, twins. Since his kids were Australian, he decided to stay back here to be close to them and the kids split their time between Brisbane and Sydney, where he moved to. He also adopted two of his nephews from Ghana and raised them in Sydney. Now, his twin girls and his nephews have all finished university, and are working in the UK, and he is alone again, but loves Sydney and says he wouldn’t live anywhere else. Although he has worked all kinds of jobs, he loves taxi driving as it gives him the freedom to travel to the UK and to Ghana any time he wants to visit his family. We then talked about Ghanaians in Sydney, and apparently there are 2500 at least: “Half of all the Ghanaians in Australia live in Sydney; you can find all of them at church on Sunday mornings – not sure what it is, but Africans are attracted to religion. Not me though. I am an atheist now. But I grew up in a house where my father woke up at 4 am every morning and played the piano and sang psalms and hymns and forced us all to sing along. I was so overjoyed when my parents got divorced, because that meant that I would go live with my mother in London and not have to wake up at 4 am ever again!” He asked me if I knew what his name meant, “Kwabena means born on a Tuesday. All Ashanti boys are named after the day of the week they were born on, often followed by their order of birth within the family, and Ashanti families always treat their boys like they are Princes! And women’s roles are very different to that of the rest of Africa. Which is why strong women like my mother escape to other countries.”

Xiaolong, China

Xiaolong is a very talkative Chinese Australian gentleman who has been in Sydney since the Tiananmen Square protests and massacre in 1989. He studied History in China and was training to be a history teacher but when he fled here, his lack of English forced him to do all sorts of odd jobs and then he worked in the manufacturing industry as a machinist until the factories all shut down one by one. He has been driving a taxi full-time for 10 years now and makes just enough to make ends meet. His wife works part-time, and his only daughter has finished a degree in Economics at Sydney Uni and works in a bank. He taught me a bit of Chinese: “Jing means capital city; Nanjing means southern capital; Beijing means northern capital. They both have a very long and interesting history.” Then he proceeded to give me a history lesson on China, channelling all his teacher training. Next, he went off on a tangent doing hilarious impressions of Australian, American, British, Irish, and Scottish Englishes. Amazing for a man who didn’t even speak the language when he came here. I asked him about Australia: “Ah, the system is very good. I like it. At least we can get rid of bad eggs in the next election, unlike in China."

Dave, Australia

Dave is a drummer who has been driving a taxi part-time for more than twenty years to support his full-time music career, but last year, he decided to drive taxis full-time to make and save some money. "Boy, that was the wrong year. Uber has really taken the wind out of the industry. I consider myself lucky if I get two rides in an hour, so I can at least get twenty rides a day. I have a good-hearted boss lady who owns 30 taxis, and her company is one of the few that is still treating us drivers real nice, so I have not given up yet." He still plays occasional gigs with two bands in Sydney. For him Ringo Starr was the greatest drummer of all: "A good drummer is one who doesn't play everything he can but has the restraint to play what is appropriate for the band and the music." He added, "I didn't think much of him when I was young, but watching him on videos now, hardly 21, wearing a restricting woollen suit, playing in front of thousands of screaming girls, not even being able to hear his bandmates, but never missing a beat. Yes, I think he was the greatest of them all." He said the two bands he plays with in Sydney have different styles of music, and once, both of his bands played at the same venue, one after the other, and both were surprised at how different his drums sounded in the other band. And there, he met a mate he had played his first gig with when he was 19. A few days later, his first girlfriend from 25 years ago showed up at one of his shows wanting to talk to him. Now he thinks the universe is telling him something.

Salim, Jordan

Salim is a happy driver who works as an accountant during the week and only drives taxis on the weekend. He went to India to finish his university degree in the 80s and lived in Aurangabad and travelled all over India, and speaks Arabic, English, Urdu, Hindi and Marathi. He spoke at great length to me (in Hindi no less) about Aurangabad and nearby Ajanta and Ellora, and then about Jerash and Petra in Jordan, but said he knew more about India than he did about Jordan as he had lived in India most of his youth. I asked him why he went to study in India, and he said, "We all did. India was the best place for most of us in the Middle East to get a good education in English. And it was so big and spacious and beautiful, and we could ride around the country on our Royal Enfield motorbikes." He moved to Australia 20 years ago to study Accounting at UTS. He said he still talks to his classmates and friends from India almost every day, and one of them is a minister in the central government who keeps inviting him to come visit, but what with supporting six children, the oldest of whom started freshman year at UTS this year studying Civil Engineering, he doesn't have much time to travel any more. His wife is a pharmacist but cannot work much on account of the kids: "What can you do? Such is life!"

Alexei, Georgia

Alexei came here to Sydney in 1998 as a teenager with his mum, grandma and two-year-old baby sister, and he still keeps going back and forth between Australia and Georgia, where his granddad still lives and "drinks vodka all day, smokes cigarettes and weed, and is still as strong as a horse at 91." Alexei studied undergraduate Civil Engineering in Georgia and then studied postgraduate mining engineering at UNSW and went to work in the mining industry in Western Australia. Then his grandma got sick with dementia 7 years ago, so he gave up his job and came back to Sydney to look after her. "They said to put her in a nursing home. We Georgians don't do that to our family members. My sister came here as a 2-year-old, so she is like an Australian and found it

hard to care for grandma." Alexei looked after his grandma all by himself while driving a taxi part-time at nights for six years until she died at age 89. His grandma didn't remember any of her family members as her memory faded: "She had two husbands – she couldn't recognise either of them," but could remember her first-born grandchild – him. He always loved cats, and his grandmother loved them too. "Now, it's just me and my cat. I can't seem to maintain a relationship with a woman because I get really annoyed if she begins even a small argument with me. You see, my parents used to fight all the time, and I just hated it. They were both jazz musicians. I think it is better if a couple has separate interests, so their ego doesn't get in the way."

Dawood, Syria

Dawood, my taxi driver on a treacherously rainy day in Sydney, was a very distinguished looking and handsome man, and seemed to know his way around some of Sydney's dangerously narrow streets. He said he used to study at UTS over 30 years ago. He completed a Bachelor of Construction Engineering but never did his practical training so never worked in the field. I asked why. He said, "I am from Syria, and I learned French in Syria, so English was hard for me at the time. The Australian Government used to offer 510 hours of English classes for us under the Adult Migrant English Program which was very good. Then I wanted to do a Masters' but did not have the confidence. Also, by that time I was driving a taxi and my business was doing very well, so I had no time for studies." I asked him how he got to Sydney. He said, "I was in the Syrian Army where I served for two years. I was a Lieutenant. Then I met my wife who came to visit her family in Syria – she was born and raised in Australia." So, he moved here for her and has three children, and the oldest is a lawyer for a construction company. "She got 98.75 in her ATAR and got into Law School at Sydney Uni," he said proudly. His three children still live with him, although he has bought a house for each one of them – "I used to have a fleet of taxis – I had 16 before the Covid-19 pandemic, now I have 6. It is hard to find drivers, so I still drive one of my taxis every day, as there's no point in paying for a license otherwise." He works the 5 am – 5 pm taxi shift every day. He has been back to Syria just twice in the past 30 years, in 2007 and 2017.

Diego, Philippines

Diego is from the Philippines but has been driving a taxi in Sydney for 38 years now. Before, he used to be a sailor in the merchant navy, mainly on Japanese ships plying the high seas. I asked him why he gave it up and he said, "It's not a life for raising a family. My wife ordered me to stop, so I did. Besides, the Somali pirates were just becoming a huge problem." He said his wife loves shopping, so he accompanies her on her shopping trips once a week, as it's a great way to spend some time with her. He has three grown children – one son is a commercial airline pilot, one is a robotics engineer, and his daughter is a lawyer. He said he bought four houses in Sydney, one for himself and his wife, and one each for his children, but they all still live under one roof.

And then there are all the wonderful Southeast Asian taxi drivers I have talked to, from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, many of whom I even share a language or two with, and our conversations are a bit different, and often touch on our shared sociopolitical contexts from our home countries. Stories for another day.