

...The Taxi...

Yep that's all I have for the title – 'The Taxi' – oh my goodness I wish I could take you right there with me in the taxi, but I can't so here, lets try and see where I can take you!

Oh how I wish for a Rav 4 of my own, to go where I want – when I want – to one day be independent again – but for three months I have been locked into relying on taxis and spending most of my budget on what feels like, somedays – taxi fares. So when one is on a budget and one is choosing a taxi – there is a big difference between the guy who speaks English and wants to charge you 6,000Rwf – because he sees you are white and an opportunity to make some money from, and the genuine little Rwandan battler who has absolutely no English and only charges 3,000Rwf. Yes I am the cheapskate and yes I use every opportunity to learn Kinyarwanda and yes every time I step into this taxi – I literally take my life in my own hands and fear that this could be the day I'm going to meet my maker!

So I have been regularly using my little taxi man who answers to the name Dujane – when I tell you he has no English and I have limited Kinyarwanda our conversations sound a little like this....

Ring ring, "allo"

"Dujane – nitwe Michele"

"Yego (yes)"

"Mu Rugo – Kicikuru" (My home to Kicikuru)

"Yego" – and then basically it is game over – within five minutes he is at my door and I'm in the taxi and not a word is spoken unless I have my Kinya book with me and I practise a little on him. I like that he is loyal, gracious, honest and reliable – but the taxi – lets get back to the taxi.

So – the passenger door and the door frame of the car actually don't meet when you close them – not sure if that makes sense or not – but they don't meet. The seat belt may have one day been retractable but it has lost the ability to retract and it is so frayed I even wonder what good it would serve you. Because it no longer retracts you could almost fit another person on my lap and still have room with this seatbelt. Then there's the revision mirror – traditionally used for the driver to glance into, to see what may be behind them – not in Dujane's taxi – it faces the passenger and is almost hanging by a thread! So once you are in – if you fear you may never get out – you're probably right – there is no handle in the little socket where a handle should be – so Dujane walks around the car and lets you out – or you put your hand through the window and open from the outside. Oh that's only if the electronic windows are working – which they are not always. I want to say that the brakes squeal – but I'm not even sure that the car has reliable brakes. What makes me think the brakes may not be reliable – oh only that when we come to a corner and we are facing downhill and the car is still rolling into on coming traffic and Dujane makes the 'Tst' noise I think he is pretty much thinking – hope this car is going to stop! Should the brakes work – I think it is pretty much fair to say that stop and give way signs in Rwanda are merely a suggestion – as are pedestrian crossings! If you sit back and observe what initially looks like chaos on the Rwandan roads and slowly learn, you will notice that what looks like organised chaos actually has a very ordered manner to it. There is NEVER any road rage and there is always a gentle compliance of all drivers.

The most impressive feature of this taxi is in fact the counter that tells you how far you have travelled and what your fare will cost you – I certainly haven't seen it in all taxis – actually not in many at all. It keeps him and you honest and it is a great asset to the car. Oh and of course the radio works well too – he doesn't speak English but he doesn't mind listening to Hillsong worship music in his car.

About two weeks ago when we rolled down the hill and I first realised that the brakes possibly don't work – I also realised that Dujane had started taking some of the back streets where the roads seem a lot flatter with less hills. I had a friend in the taxi this day and I mentioned to her that I had concerns that the brakes may not be working too well. Well it was that very afternoon when Dujane dropped me home that, I realised that he did in fact have a rather awkward encounter with his brakes. As you know I live on quite a hill and so Dujane had stopped outside the front of my house to drop me home. I had a few groceries on the back seat and so asked him to 'Buretse' – 'wait' – while I carried my groceries in. As I opened my passenger door, Dujane opened his drivers door – left it open – walked around the car and started to carry the bags from the car. Now, remember he has no English and I have minimal Kinyarwanda. As he is taking the bags from the back seat, I am still holding onto the passengers door and the whole car starts rolling down the hill – like serious rolling down the hill – gaining momentum and gradually getting faster. At first Dujane dug his feet into the red clay soil – and held onto the car trying to stop it from rolling – I called out to him and said "you need to pull the brake on – oh what am I saying this guy can't

“speak English – Dujane – Dujane!” Then he jumped into the passenger side – car is gaining more momentum sliding down my hill and he pulls the handbrake on harder – to no avail – he was still sliding down the hill!

I had visions of this car landing nose first in a ditch – then Dujane could sense the seriousness of the car now really rolling down the hill and he jumps across the console and slams his foot on the brake pedal and it finally stops – lucky I didn’t buy eggs that day!

So yesterday I called Dujane and he was to be here at 5pm – 5:05pm passed and then 5:10pm – he is barely late on pick ups – sometimes he may be late arriving to bring me home again but he is always at my house on time – its now 5:15pm and no Dujane. I often think what is the point of calling him when we can’t speak each others language and he is obviously in traffic – so I didn’t call. As I was writing a text to say I would be late for the next appointment I looked up and a taxi drove up the hill – I stood up and went to hop straight in – only to notice it was not my Dujane – this driver had a little English but not much – only enough to tell me – Dujane – Kinyarwanda – automobile – and then he lifted both his hands off the steering wheel and pushed his hands together – so I can only assume the taxi that I once thought I may myself actually die in – has in fact itself died. Oh poor Dujane – now I feel for him – he was on a good wicket with this Mzungu – if only he could buy a new car I would keep using him – but I bet you – I just bet next week he will turn up with his old car all battered and bruised and he will keep on looking for taxi fares because he probably has a family to feed and support and this may be his only source of income for supporting them.

So the life choices we make hey – to take the car out of my budget so I can get over here quicker – only to risk my life everyday in a dodgy taxi – meanwhile providing an income for the nice taxi driver who is just trying his best with what he has to support his family. What are my other options – to walk – not all the time – to catch a moto – I refuse – my travel insurance doesn’t cover it and the medical bills would cost more than what I would save on a taxi!

So my friends in the western world as you step into your car today – don’t take driving for granted – give thanks for your good brakes – your retractable seatbelt – windows that go up and down and door handles that actually have the handle for you to get out of the car with. Give thanks that you can feel safe in a mode of transport that you trust and give thanks for your independence. All of these things are not currently in my world – but they give me stories to add to my repertoire – just remember if you haven’t heard from me in a little while – I may well have died in a dodgy taxi!

Bless you,

Blackie ox