

## WE NEED TO TALK TURKEY ABOUT TAXIS!

By; Stephen G. Wright  
For the Almaty Herald

As we are all aware, any boy in America can grow up to be president (Hillary is waiting in the wings) and in Almaty everyone can grow up to be a taxi driver. Certainly the conditions of life here do demand a sense of the entrepreneurial spirit, or bandit capitalism as the case may be.

Allow me to convey an interesting little story about an expat that took a taxi from our famous (infamous) Almaty International Airport –

The expat and his wife had struck up a conversation with a local woman during their return flight from Dubai. They invited the lady to share their car as they had arranged for a driver to be at the airport. Nice idea, however the plane from Dubai, via Shemkent was delayed 12 hours. So, when they arrived there was no driver.

Two men approached this dynamic trio and asked if they needed a taxi. During the very short discussion as to what they shall do the two men had taken their baggage and began to briskly trot over to the Mercedes they had waiting. The three chased after the men and were herded into the car. The expat asked several times, as did his wife, for the fee for the ride near to Abai. The reply, given after the car was securely underway, was that it would be 100 tenge per kilometer.

Arriving safely at the desired destination the driver and his sidekick proudly declared that the fee was 4,000 tenge (around \$29). Now let me see here – 4000 divided by 100 is 40 kilometers. Is it REALY 40 kilometers from the airport to Abai, near to the Smak store area??? Wow, I have traveled a similar route and it sure did not seem like 40 kilometers. But I could be wrong, I'm not from here you know and the expat in question was told the same – he is not from here and does not understand. It is amazing sometimes just how stupid we expats are. It is a wonder we know how to breath! Now the expats wife and their guest are both local residents and both were shocked by this situation to the point of being speechless.

The expat explained he did not have 4,000 to give. He showed the second man of the driving duo what he did have (big mistake!). The man grabbed all his money ran to the car and got in. The driver hastily wrote a receipt (why, no one really knows) and threw it at the expat – they drove away in great haste.

Wait – the story gets better. As you know the lady that was the guest of the expat and his wife is still in the car and she is now off to Abai and Pravdy. She NOW finds here voice and asks these men why they would do such a thing to these other people. The men laughed. At her destination they charged HER, a local resident you remember, the sum of \$20.00. They went so far as to ask for \$10 more – WHY she asks in true disbelief – they reply: because it is New Year! This lady gave them the \$20 fee intimidated from her and ran to her home.

Can you believe this? Why in the name of heaven are we (locals and expats alike) accepting this behavior and allowing it to continue. PLEASE people, do not tell me this is just a by-product of the free market system and that it will all work out someday. Do not try to tell me that this is competition at work. Just try to convince me that THIS is the kind of behaviour that is endemic to the grand scheme of things that we gallant expats have brought to Kazakhstan.

I will ask the following: is there a good reason why there could not be metered taxi service here? There may be, and I am asking you to let us know what it is! If there is regulated taxi service in Almaty, with standardized fees from Almaty – Airport – Almaty, would you be very kind and tell the rest of us poor fools just who this company is? Then everyone will be better informed.

I do not suggest that the free wheeling (pun intended) taxi methodology in place here be abolished. No, let anyone that wants to taxi people about do so, and let anyone that wishes to engage them do so. I submit that we ALL should have the choice to select a service that has drivers you can trust and rely upon and have a fee schedule that is fair. A local entrepreneur could make a bundle off us expat types by running an honest airport taxi service that charged a reasonable sum and was operated by trained drivers. THAT ladies and gentleman is competition! What we have now, in the absence of information to the contrary, is plain hooliganism.

Welcome to Dodge City!

Are we having some kind-O-fun now, or what?

Responsible comments, issues for discussion, questions and observations are always welcome and may be sent to:

**CRALMATYHERALD@YAHOO.COM**

All reader submissions will be published and responded to as soon as is possible. No names will be used unless specifically requested by the sender.

© February 2004, by Stephen Gerard Wright, All Rights Reserved.