

USING TAXIS OVERSEAS *From The Sunday Mail 03 February 2008*

Friends had advised me to say to taxi drivers “Keep the Change”.

This made the New York cabbie act very strangely. He insisted not only on getting out and opening the door but also in escorting his passenger into the hotel.

He kept telling me how much he appreciated my visiting his city, and that I should “enjoy the rest of my stay”, recalled the Sydney school teacher. It was a short ride after a night’s clubbing. Change from \$10 seemed an appropriate tip.

Deciding that Big Apple cabbies are unfairly maligned, my friend headed upstairs to sleep. Next morning, when he checked his cash, he realised that he had handed over \$100 instead of \$10.

“Well, all their money looks the same in the dark – it is all green”, protested the very sheepish victim.

It wouldn’t happen to you, right? You’ve planned your holiday. Your destinations have excellent and inexpensive public transport systems. So you will never need a taxi.

Think again.

One day you will be laden with shopping, lost or just plain tired. You will find yourself in the back of a cab and hang the expense.

So, even if you don’t intend hailing a cab, a little preparation can be worthwhile – just in case.

1. Familiarise yourself with local currency so you don’t accidentally hand over too much.
2. Find out roughly what trips cost so that you are not charged astronomic flat rates, or in metered taxis taken on super-long rides
3. Carry small notes and some coins, because in many countries including England, drivers have been known to shrug and say that they have no change.
4. It is normal to pay more from an airport than to one, particularly if you use metered cabs from the street near your hotel. Differences in some cities can be 50%.
5. Avoid taxis parked outside tourist attractions and hotels – they are often reluctant to use meters or will demand that “you visit my brother’s shop”. Instead, walk a few blocks to find another taxi.
6. Insist a meter be turned on – particularly if drivers say that negotiated rates will be cheaper. “Broken” meters often recover miraculously. But even meters are not complete safeguards. Drivers in Indian cities routinely flourish papers with the “latest purported fare adjustments”.
7. When meters are not used, the negotiated fare includes tips. If fares are from a fixed-fare list, round up for tips according to the local custom.
8. When a cabbie has no meter and won’t quote you a fare, contending “you are a guest in my country, given me whatever you like”, get ready for a heated argument at the end. It is far better to open the door at this point and prepare to leave the cab. Invariably, a price will be given.
9. If tipping is the norm, rounding up or 10% is reasonable, except in the USA where increasingly 15% OR 20% is deemed fair.
10. Nor tipping for bad service can cause unpleasant arguments where tipping is the norm.
11. Where tipping isn’t expected, rounding up is appreciated for good service. But in Japan and South Korea, anything extra may be refused.
12. In Japan and South Korea, drivers (usually white-gloved) generally control opening and closing of the kerbside door from their seats. Trying to open the door yourself can cause offence.
13. Promoting the ability to communicate in English has become commonplace in Japan and South Korea. The driver may not speak English but pointing at the notice will enable communication with an English speaker by radio or mobile phone. A similar service exists in Bangkok.
14. Keep your cool in disagreements. Some Prague drivers – widely considered among Europe’s worst – delivered mild electric shocks from under-seat wiring to get rid of argumentative passengers until this practice was exposed.
15. Foreign business is considered profitable, even if you know the going rate. Two competing cabbies in Cambodia once used fists to determine who would transport a passenger from Phnom Penh’s airport.

