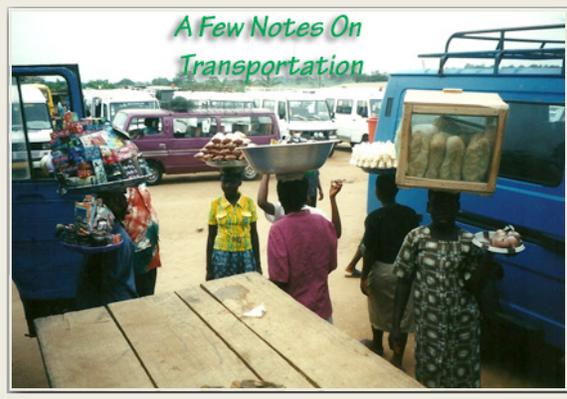

Episode 3: A Few Notes On Transportation



A fellow passenger was once kind enough to explain to me that most tro-tros started life as small Nigerian cargo holders, minivans designed to seat two or three people per row. With this in mind, consider the following standard procedures for Ghanaian tro-tro seating. A tro-tro is never considered full until each row is occupied by, at minimum, four-paying passengers. Monetary value is assigned

only to the occupation of a seat itself. Cost efficiency, therefore, may require you to squeeze as many as 3 or 4 other people's small children between your legs. Trust the experience of others; it is better to suck in your stomach and sit on your hip than to force the obese to budge up. And always avoid the last seat in the first row.

If it is your misfortune to get this last seat, closest to the door, you will undoubtedly have to share it with "the mate". The mate is a small man, or a boy who should probably be in school, that directs the driver and makes change. His primary occupation seems to be to stick his head out the door and yell at people as he is passing by. "Come, come, come. Where are you going?" He handles the concerns of the passengers and can commonly be addressed by:

"Mate, you only gave me 200 cedis."

"Mate, that was my stop" or simply

"Mate!!"

Now that fate has placed you in the very close vicinity of this person, you can expect a few different scenarios.

1. The mate, seated directly in front of you on a box of cocoyam wedged behind the front passenger seat, has his knees jammed against your crotch.

In this case, you hope he's not grinning and cringe every time he has to lean over you to make change or jump up to open the door.

2. The sedentary positions are the same but your knee happens to be shoved against his groin. I had this happen to me once in Accra. I had to spend a very unpleasant twenty minutes as this man squirmed around, digging avidly through his pockets for "something".

3. Occasionally, the mate does not sit opposite you, but rather shares a butt cheek with your seat while letting the other half of his body hang out the partially open door of the vehicle. Hopefully, his choice of handhold does not place his armpit directly over your head.

With all these overloaded cars around, mates hanging out from the side enjoying the breeze and drivers with a 50/50 chance of having a license, you're probably wondering about the police. The truth is, there aren't a lot of them. You'll see no flashing squad cars or hear shrill sirens chasing down an errant speeder.

There are regular police checkpoints but most Ghanaians have the system worked out pretty well. I've personally heard of overloaded taxis which stop before a checkpoint, let out excess passengers, and meet them ten minutes later on the other side. Another technique is to convince the officer that you all absolutely have to travel in one taxi since only one of you knows the way. However, if you simply must come down to terms with an unforgiving cop, fall back on the old standby: lie with charm and don't be afraid to break out your wallet.

The following "hypothetical" situation will demonstrate my point. Say you and a group of your exchange student friends are heading to Frankie's for some ice cream in downtown Accra. The taxi limit is four people per car but your party consists of five AFS-ers and one Ghanaian. You've all been around for a while now and you could easily take two cars but you and your friends are too cheap. Therefore, your driver is nervously talking to himself while trying to navigate his obviously overloaded taxi through a checkpoint. You hunker down in the seat but, unfortunately, white people glow like ghosts in an African nightscape. Sucks to be you! The cop sticks his head in and remarks good-naturedly on the illegal situation before him. The driver babbles about how you forced him to do it. You try the "ignorance of us silly foreigners" excuse but the officer only laughs, unimpressed by your emphatic pleas and deception. Finally, he looks at you and remarks,

"I'd like some ice cream too". You all jump on this opportunity to offer to bring him back some and what kind does he want. "No," he shakes his head and stares penetratingly into the car. "How can I be sure you would come back? I'd like my ice cream now."

Hearty laughter and pleasant banter follows as one of you digs 2,000 cedis out of your pocket and urges the officer to buy himself a couple of frozen yogurts. At which point, he smiles and waves you through.



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