

The Abu Dhabi Taxi Driver

by [Nikos Akritas](#) (May 2025)



Unless I peer in through the front window of a taxi before getting in, I never see my driver's face, only the back of his head. Most of the time, aside from telling him my destination, the journey passes in silence. I check messages on my phone and he, well, I don't know what goes through his head.

I stopped asking questions about what home was like after witnessing a number of colleagues gushing about the 'amazing' conversation they had with their taxi driver. The focus of

attention was self-centred, the other person in the conversation really there to illustrate how worldly they are. Such conversations only feed an egotistical fascination, increasing our knowledge about other places and other people vicariously. It is, essentially, a form of virtue signalling.

It's not entirely true that the journey passes in complete silence because, and this is increasingly becoming the case, many taxi drivers do not know the route to my destination (some resort to using their own internet data to find the way—a costly option, as the company does not pay for internet access and it is expensive out here). They are poorly trained; many are extremely nervous when let loose to go and pick up customers—apologizing for their lack of knowledge and explaining, “It is my first week.” The turnover must be getting higher. I then have to give street by street directions, which is a bit of a knack because if you say the ‘wrong’ word at the beginning of a sentence the driver (most have a poor grasp of English) takes what he hears as a command.

And so, for example, “Turn right at the end of this road” is heard as “turn right,” and you are catapulted to the other side of the taxi as he takes a sharp right, leaving you further away from your destination than you started because of the one-way and no U-turn systems. “At the end of this road, turn right,” could be the way to go but even this won't guarantee your directions are followed. It's often best just to say, “Turn left/right,” when you are approaching the appropriate road, although even this has its problems, as roads are often five or six lanes wide and you have to explain to your driver to keep to the right, not turn right. Good luck.

But it's not just a language issue, as I came to realize over time. Much frustration and a few arguments later, I paid a little more attention to my drivers when I noticed a couple of times that traffic lights had turned green and we were still

stationary. Only after telling the driver, "Go!" did I notice, from his jolt of surprise, that he had fallen asleep at the wheel.

These drivers work twelve hour shifts, seven days a week. When they finish their shift they hand over the vehicle to their taxi buddy, who takes over the next twelve hour shift. Exhausted, the one who has just finished just has time to eat before slumping and falling asleep in a bed in a small room shared by a number of others (four to a room if lucky, two sleeping while two work), often with poor air conditioning (stifling in Abu Dhabi's heat), if it works at all.

But that's not the worst of it. Lured over with promises of a fixed salary and benefits, they arrive to find the salary is much lower than promised and there are no days off or holidays. Holidays, if they wish to take them, can be taken upon request, after serving the company for a period of time, but pay is reduced to half salary and for many this comes with deduction of pay at a daily rate. The longer one takes off work, the more money lost. For this reason, many keep holidays to a minimum and some haven't seen family in years.

On top of all this, for the privilege of such an opportunity, they have to pay for their own flights (they are all recruited from abroad) and, for some, accommodation is not provided during their two months of training. Some years ago, it was different; flights and accommodation were paid for while training was provided. Conditions have clearly worsened over the years.

Since Covid, even salaries have plummeted, from 1000 AED (roughly \$290) to 800 AED (\$230) per month, and at least one company now has daily targets for their drivers to meet. If they don't meet them, they not only forfeit a measly bonus at the end of the month, but also have to make up the shortfall from their own salary.

Clearly taken advantage of and abused by their employers (I don't know if passports are withheld, as in neighbouring countries, but employers are alerted when an employee passes through an airport), the 'employment laws' in the UAE are just a smokescreen for the abuse of vulnerable workers from poor countries. Most people know these workers endure long shifts and live in poor conditions but the government does nothing about it. Like the West, it seeks cheap labour and that cheapness comes at a price—with a human cost. The drivers put up with it because the choice is abuse and send a little money home or live in dire poverty back home.

Driving standards in Abu Dhabi are, to put it mildly, poor. Defensive driving is a must and when those working long shifts are added into the mix, Abu Dhabi's roads become a recipe for disaster. If, however, a taxi driver has an accident, likely given the above, the cost of repair once again comes out of his salary, even though the taxi firms have insurance.

My colleagues sometimes complain about the strong body odour that permeated the taxi they took that day, criticizing the driver for a lack of hygiene or thought for others. "Have they never heard of deodorant?" I wouldn't be surprised if some haven't, given they come from very poor villages in impoverished countries. Additionally, deodorant is a luxury item many just cannot afford at the end of the month, when what little that ends up in their pockets is sent home to support a family.

Some expats absolutely love it out here—fancy buildings, fancy restaurants, tax-free salaries, beach clubs, swanky bars, brunches, and the list goes on. All made more affordable by the cheap taxis and abused workers who support *the life* they post online, for others to envy, on their social media accounts. For those providing the cheap labour, the fuss expats make over certain things must be as bewildering as if they were meeting aliens from another planet.

If coming over to the UAE to enjoy the glitz and 'glamour' that the oil-rich emirates have to offer, spare a thought for the Abu Dhabi taxi driver and his/her family back home. They are probably the closest you are going to get to the armies of abused workers who keep the country going, offering you that luxury holiday in the sun.

Abu Dhabi is a perfect example that the 'trickle-down' effect doesn't exist when an extremely wealthy country chooses to take advantage of the desperate, who are merely tolerated (at best) to serve its needs.

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